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By HELEN F. HETHERINGTON, and the
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GRIFFITH FARRAN & CO., LIMITED, LONDON.

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BY

HELEN F. HETHERINGTON

AND THE

REV. DARWIN BURTON

AUTHORS OF

"PAUL NUGENT, MATERIALIST"

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. II.

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CHAPTER I.

THE PRIORY AND WILDERNESS CRICKET-MATCH.

THE cricket-ground at The Wilderness owed most of its superior qualities to the care which Colonel Witherington had vicariously bestowed on it. He had it levelled till it rivalled the smoothness of a bowling-green, and mown as often as the lawns which were in sight of the drawing-room windows. Sometimes he would take the roller himself when the dew was on the grass, and the birds were singing their matins in every thicket; and think of the matches in the playing-fields at Eton, when his heart was as light as his steps, and his hopes as high as the Castle tower. To all

outward appearance, his life had been successful enough to gratify the moderate ambition of most of his comrades. He had attained a fair amount of honour and distinction in his profession. He had married the girl whom he had last fallen in love with. When he retired from the army he had a large enough private fortune to support himself and his family; and over and above this, his wife came unexpectedly into possession of *The Wilderness*, and he found himself to all intents and purposes master of a fine property with a large rent-roll, unburdened by any mortgage. His wife was the fascinating widow of his second cousin, a gentle refined woman, with the smile of an angel, and a temper that seemed appropriate to a denizen of the heavenly spheres; but, with the cares of a second experience of matrimony, added to the burden of a son by the first, who behaved neither wisely nor well, the smile faded away into nothingness, and the temper became of the earth, earthy, inasmuch as it never soared

above the most mediocre standard, and frequently sank far below it. Many a time and oft, Colonel Witherington wished that he had been content to worship his cousin's widow at a respectful distance ; for, later on in life, when the poetry of existence had changed into the prosiest of prose, his once idolised Marian developed a constant anxiety for tempering the enjoyment of each member of her family. If all was going well, she would give vent to a grumble or a grievance, which had the marring effect of a tight shoe at an otherwise enjoyable party. Nothing could go quite smoothly, and nobody could be quite content, in Mrs. Witherington's presence. Even a cricket-match she spoilt for Di, to a certain extent, for she took a fancy for remaining in the house, and then complained of being neglected and forgotten, because the young people spent the day in the field ; and yet, if her daughter had offered to stay with her, she would have refused the sacrifice, and scolded her for thinking her capable of accepting it.

Gradually a crust of whims and fancies had grown over what was really a warm and loving heart, and as the outside world never came in contact with anything but this crust, most people set her down as a very disagreeable person, and gave her credit for few even passable qualities. She was a good wife, an excellent mother, and a kind mistress; and yet she made herself like a blister to all those who were nearest and dearest.

“Mother, you will come out to-day, won’t you?” said Di, coaxingly, on the Saturday morning when the grand match was to be played between The Priory and The Wilderness. “You cannot say that it is too hot or too cold, or that there is wind enough to hurt a fly.”

“How you can ask me, I really can’t think,” looking up at the bright face before her without the slightest vestige of a smile. “Do I look as if I ought to be out, when there is a fog hanging over the river?”

“Only a delicious soft haze, which comes

from the heat, and makes the valley look ever so lovely. But I must be off," catching up a basket. "Flo is going to help me with the flowers, and there she is."

She hurried out of the French window to meet the Rector's daughter, who was coming across the lawn, and looking like a rosebud in her pink cambric. Their object was to make the table laid out in the large tent look pretty, for they were sure that the men would enjoy their luncheon all the more if they had something nice to look at; but they had not much time for their decorations, and the clock was striking eleven before they had finished.

Di was holding a white rose in her hand, and wondering if she should place it next to a dark coleus, or by itself with a spray of maiden-hair, when Jack Montague came in, looking very big in his suit of white flannels, with the Cambridge-blue blazer thrown over them. He was followed, to her exceeding surprise, by Lord Raymond Penrose, who

explained in his leisurely fashion that he had come in Wildgrave's place; but that it was putting a square man into a round hole, for he had forgotten how to bat, he never knew how to bowl, and he had never been known to run unless something was coming after him.

"I am afraid we are not in the habit of running after people down here," Di said, with a spice of malice, for she had got it into her young head that he was a mass of conceit, and she was always longing to take it out of him.

"No? Then I shall be out of my element," very quietly, but with an amused look in his half-closed eyes. "Couldn't you take me in hand, yourself, Miss Witherington?"

"I? Oh dear, no!" taken aback by what she considered his coolness. "I never run, except in a game of 'drop the handkerchief,' with the school-children."

"Oh, if a handkerchief will help you, I can manage that," pulling one out from up

his sleeve. "We play at it in town constantly."

"But where? Not in the parks surely?"

"No, in the ball-rooms. I'm a poor younger son—a detrimental of the first water—so I never had a chance; but if an 'eligible' shows inside the doorway, the game begins at once."

"Now, I know that you are chaffing," in a tone of disgust, feeling as if she had been taken in.

"Soberest earnest, I assure you!" he said gravely, as he picked up her pair of garden-scissors from the ground, and put them in the basket which she had brought with the flowers. "The game goes on almost every night of the week, and as I'm sick to death of looking on, I thought you might give me a turn down here."

She looked up into his grave face, with a pair of puzzled eyes. Of course, it was all nonsense, but why did the tiresome man look as solemn as any churchwarden? She glanced

towards the other side of the table, but Montague, who had known Flora Kindersley from a child, seemed entirely engrossed in trying to tie up a bunch of flowers for her with an absurdly short piece of string.

"No; you are out of your element down here," she said, with a little laugh, "so the sooner you go back the better."

"But if out of mine, let me be in yours. It might be a better one."

"It *might* be. How very flattering!"

"I never flatter," mendaciously.

"And if it were a better one—you *might not* be suited for it."

"No; but I could be acclimatised. Take that for your mission."

"But I've no vocation."

"Yes, you have," looking down into her bright face with a sudden depth of appreciation in his eyes; "you want nothing but what you've got."

An unreasoning and uncalled-for blush passed, as it were, in a rush of pink colour

over her face. Jack looked round, saw the illumination, and was vexed by it, he scarcely knew why; and at the same moment Phil, looking as if he had all the cares of a Cabinet on his shoulders, dashed into the tent, with an eager: "I say, you fellows! what are you doing here? Do look alive, or we sha'n't get the first innings over by luncheon."

"Who goes in first?" asked Jack.

"You do; so look sharp! Flo, you will keep the score?"

"Of course I will; I always do."

"You back our side?" said Jack, confidently.

"Does she though?" cried Phil, indignantly.

"She was my first little sweetheart at two years old. Such a dear little thing!" with an amused smile.

"Then she won't be your last," with an energy that sent the blood into Flo's delicate face, as well as into his own.

“How do you know that?” she said, recovering herself quickly. “When Jack is as old as Methuselah, and I’m as ancient as ancient can be——”

“Why, you’ll be snapped up long before then, and he can’t have you if you belong to somebody else. Now, come along. No use humbugging here, and keeping every one waiting,” he said impatiently. But when they all left the tent he did not hurry on in front, but waited for Flo, who seemed to have a fit of the dawdles—perhaps born of an impulse of coquetry.

She was small, fragile, and pale, with a clear white skin, and a pair of large pathetic eyes, which seemed to have been misappropriated by her, stolen from some sadder life, which had nothing to do with the joyousness of her own. She nearly drove her father mad with the wildness of her ways. She shocked her mother intensely by her propensity for flirtation, but there was not a house in the village where she was not warmly welcomed; and though she

seemed to have no heart when she was in a mood for teasing, tears would roll down her cheeks as she sat by the bedside of a dying child, or some poor patient invalid waiting his call to rest. Di and Flo were great friends, and yet they often quarrelled. Devoted to Phil as Di was, she could not bear to see his spirits go up and down according to the way in which Miss Kindersley chose to play on them. And when her feelings on this subject grew rampant, she was in the habit of explaining them in plainest English. Knowing that she was in the wrong, Flo naturally resented being found fault with, and she would answer with so much warmth that, paradoxical as it may sound, a certain quantum of coolness was the consequence. But no quarrel could last long between girls of such healthy natures, and they generally went about together in the friendliest manner possible. Di despised love affairs, and scouted sentiment, and she could not understand Flo's constant desire to be surrounded by a crowd of admirers. She

watched her on the cricket-ground. Jack was at one wicket, Lord Raymond at another. Phil was fielding, so Miss Kindersley was amusing herself with quiet little Mr. Benson, a round-faced, chubby little man, who presented a great contrast to his vicar and fellow curate. Mr. Benson, like Newcome and Vivian, was sworn to celibacy for many years ahead, but none the less he enjoyed a conversation with a pretty girl, and found it a pleasant relaxation after his abstinence from every social pleasure during the rest of the week—for fasting improves the appetite. Lady Wildgrave, who had come down the night before to pay a short visit to her home, before starting for Scotland, was spending a quiet morning with her mother, and most of the people in the neighbourhood preferred to drop in after luncheon. So that cricket engrossed the attention in the morning, but society distracted it in the afternoon. The play was remarkable, but not for its excellence. Lord Raymond declared that he shut his eyes whenever a ball

was coming, but nevertheless made some very good hits. Once, to the delight of all the Priorites, he sent the ball flying over the top of the tent. It fell at the feet of Mrs. Witherington, as she was enjoying a meditative stroll in a quiet corner. It startled her out of her reverie. It gave her the opportunity of feeling upset and aggrieved, and sent her back to the house in a bad temper, whilst the distant cry of "lost ball" conveyed no meaning to her ear, and she was perfectly indifferent as to which score it would increase. For her own little ailments were the pivot of her thoughts, and she could have ignored the first sight of Mont Blanc in its white beauty, if she had been suffering from her liver, her head, or a grumbling tooth.

Lord Raymond made the highest score on his side, and came to lay his unexpected honours, and his lengthy self, on the grass at Di's feet. She abused him roundly, telling him that he was an outrageous humbug, pretending that he knew nothing about it, and playing better than any one else.

"No one was more surprised than myself," he said quietly. "I suppose the thought that you were looking on inspired me."

"Certainly not, when you were playing against us."

"I am only playing for Montague, because Wildgrave asked me, and you didn't."

"Phil settles the matches."

"Ah! I must make up to Phil," thoughtfully. "Where is he now?"—raising himself on his elbow.

"He is long-stop, and he has just caught out Mr. Montague," her eyes shining with delight, as she threw down her parasol in order to use both hands for clapping.

Dandy looked up, and said softly, "I'm sorry for Montague."

"Didn't Phil do it splendidly?" she asked, with enthusiasm, ignoring his last remark.

"He is quite up to the average of the ordinary schoolboy."

"Lord Raymond, I call that an insult," with an indignant flash.

“Oh, the superlative prejudice of woman!” he exclaimed, with uplifted eyebrows. “Not even content with an average, when I’m always miles below it!”

“What sort of average, please?”—her foot moving impatiently.

“The average man—that sums up all my shortcomings in three words.”

“Why do you always say what you don’t mean?” with unconcealed irritation.

“Why do you always think I don’t mean what I say?” opening his eyes a little wider than usual, in order to study her face.

The colour rushed up into it—a vivid rose like a sunset. She looked across the cricket-ground to the valley beyond, where the river shone like a golden ribbon here and there amongst rushes and willows, and gardens of hops. “Because I should have to change my opinion of you entirely,” she said steadily, “if I didn’t.”

A shade seemed to fall on his face as he turned it away, as if to examine the doings of

a spider on the grass. "I would give something to alter that opinion," he said gravely.

"I never said it was a bad opinion," with quick compunction, for it seemed to her as if he must have guessed the depths of disapprobation hidden away in her own breast.

"Didn't you? I suppose I took it for granted," with sudden and most unexpected bitterness. The next moment he got up, and walking slowly across the grass, as if the exertion were rather too much for him, joined himself on to Colonel Witherington, who was watching the game with critical eyes.

Di looked after him, with an impatient shrug of her shoulders. By his unwonted humility, Lord Raymond had succeeded in making her very uncomfortable. One moment, she was indignant because he evidently mistook her for a simple country-girl who could be easily taken in; the next, she was humiliated because she feared that she had been rude to a guest.

"All out for 120! I don't think much of

that," exclaimed Flora triumphantly. "Now, Mr. Benson, go in, and do wonders."

"You forget Benson plays for Montague," said Phil, rather sulkily. "I lead off with old Mathers."

"I've half a mind to go and talk to Mrs. Witherington."

"Pray do," huffily. "You are pretty sure to find her in the morning-room."

"Then I shall stay here, for after all, it is nicer to be anywhere in the open-air."

"If that is all you want you had better go into the garden, and Di will score."

"Much obliged to you," with a toss of her head.

His fair face clouded, and his spirits went down to zero, whilst he looked at her entreatingly, asking as plainly as possible for a smile or a nod of encouragement. But it was Miss Kindersley's cue to punish him for his remark to Montague, and she only gave him a vision of her back hair, as she turned to Colonel Witherington's groom, who happened to be

passing, and praised him for the way he had acted as wicket-keeper. A boy in love has never an ounce of wisdom, or Phil might have known that the way to get the little flirt's whole attention was to seem not to care about a particle of it. He shouldered his bat, and felt as idiotically miserable as boys do under the circumstances; but he recovered himself sooner than usual in the interest of the match, and hit with such energy and skill that the score went up with flying leaps.

In the afternoon Mrs. Witherington came on to the scene in a furtive sort of manner, half ashamed of appearing after she had refused to do so earlier in the day. Lady Wildgrave, whom she disapproved of, was her real attraction, for she had an ardent curiosity to see her with Lord Raymond, and judge for herself as to her behaviour. Em was looking charming in a white dress embroidered in gold, and she sat by her mother's side for a long while—like a girl of the olden days,

afraid to part from her chaperon. The large hat, smothered in white lilac, was especially becoming to her, and she had a peaceful, restful expression on her delicate face, as if she had left all her cares in the town, and was resolved to enjoy herself in the country. Mrs. Witherington thawed, Di grew enthusiastic, Flo whispered maliciously, "Splendidly got up; turn on the footlights. Ah, now the play begins!" as Dandy sauntered up, and throwing away his cigarette, subsided on to the grass in front of Mrs. Witherington, who looked absurdly perturbed, and also of Em, who greeted him with a welcoming smile.

"So I hear that you have been distinguishing yourself. I never was more astonished in my life," she said, with more frankness than flattery.

"My cousin has a mission, Mrs. Witherington, to tell me home-truths. It's rather bad form in public, don't you think so?" addressing her in his most deliberate of tones.

That lady was quite in a flutter, for she did

not know how to talk to "bold, bad men;" and Lord Raymond, she had been told by evil-tongued gossips, was a sheep of the blackest description. "I agree with you," she said, with unwonted graciousness—for she liked the expression of his face, as well as the deferential manner in which he had addressed her—"home-truths are only to be told at home."

"A thousand thanks. I was certain you would take my part."

"Simply because Mrs. Witherington doesn't know you as well as I do," said Lady Wildgrave with a pout.

"Unfortunately we are first cousins," turning to his hostess with an explanatory air, "and that relationship allows enormous latitude in the way of abuse."

"I should have thought, I really should have expected"—she began, and then stopped in embarrassment, as it occurred to her that it would by no means do to explain either what she thought or expected.

“Yes, you would, naturally,” he went on, just as if she had finished her sentence; “but you know that when a fellow says to you, ‘I treat you as a friend,’ he is going to treat you uncommonly badly. Well, this fair cousin of mine is always obliging me to cry, ‘For heaven’s sake, treat me as a stranger.’”

“Talk no more nonsense,” exclaimed Em imperatively. “Here is the millionaire. We must all bow our heads in the presence of gold!”

Mrs. Witherington was getting completely bewildered. She looked up, expecting to see she scarcely knew what, and felt disappointed when she only perceived Mr. Strangways’ large form striding across the grass, within full range of the cricket ball.

“He looks quite capable of marching straight over me,” murmured Dandy, “without even waiting to kick me out of the way. I think I had better slope.”

“Don’t trouble yourself,” said Em quietly, as she saw that the capitalist had stopped to

speaking to Di. "He is not thinking of us; gold goes after beauty, if beauty won't go after gold. There is a resistless attraction between them."

"My daughter is interested in Mr. Strangways' work-people," Mrs. Witherington put in, with a touch of acidity.

"And Mr. Strangways is interested in Miss Witherington's—what?" asked Em, as if she wished for information.

"Miss Witherington's Sunday-school class of naughty little boys," suggested Dandy, with a serious face.

Mrs. Witherington smiled on him approvingly. She thought it so nice of a fast London man to think of anything so simple and religious as a Sunday-school!

CHAPTER II.

SKIRMISHING.

WHILST the butterflies were amusing themselves after their own foolish fashion, the more serious-minded members of the company had drawn together in a small knot outside the tent. Cyril Vivian had arrived, and was talking earnestly to the Rector of Derwent's Cray; whilst Montague and the Colonel stood by, joining in the discussion, or entering into one of their own, till the former was called off to take part in the fielding.

"I don't think you need be in the least alarmed," Mr. Kindersley was saying in his calm impressive manner. "I would defy Strangways to show cause why you should have a School Board in your part of Dainton.

You are getting your children to go to your school in a wonderful manner, so that I don't see that a petition would have a leg to stand on."

"You forget our debt," said Vivian in a low voice, as he made a hole in the turf with his stick, and then proceeded to fill it in after a strangely conscientious fashion. "It feels like a ton of iron hanging round my neck."

"You have so many fine friends—why don't you get them to help you?"

"They've been most generous. I've nothing to complain of there," he said warmly. "I really haven't the face to ask them again."

"I often think that when we hesitate about asking, we are doing those people a grave injustice," the Rector rejoined thoughtfully, though he was not too much engrossed to forget to clap a really superior bit of fielding. "We are robbing them of an opportunity of doing what they ought, because of our beggarly pride."

"But they did help me with what they

called my 'public-house fad.' They chaffed me no end, but they opened their pockets at the same time, so I did not mind a bit. Has Strangways been at you yet?"

"I should think he had," said the Rector with a laugh, as he thought of the hot discussion he had had with the manufacturer only a few evenings before. "He came at me with the delicacy of a battering-ram, and seemed astonished that I did not knock under at once. He made a great point of leaving us alone, but I wouldn't have it; I dared him to do his worst, and told him to his face that I had a large majority to back us up."

"Lucky man, how I envy you," said Vivian, with a sigh, as the conflicting elements in his own district deprived him of all confidence in his resources.

"Montague scored off him capitally. There's a puzzling fellow for you to study. I don't mean as to his cricket, which seems up to the mark, but nothing wonderful. I've known him ever since he was an Eton boy,

but to tell you the truth, I don't know him half so well, to-day, as I did ever so many years ago."

"How's that? I thought you were hand and glove with him."

"So I am to a certain extent, but it's a case of 'thus far, and no further.' There is a barrier between us, and I'm certain that I shall never break it down. I'm a too familiar friend, if you understand."

"I understand quite well," said Vivian, his eyes following Montague, as he ran with great speed after a ball, and saved it from going beyond the boundary. "It does not do to know a fellow too intimately, if you wish to strike him with awe. Even our own Bishop, you know, was respected by every one except his two little daughters."

"Ah, daughters have a way of being very cheeky," the Rector rejoined, with a smile, as his eyes rested fondly on his own, diligently employed in helping Di to chaff the solemn Mr. Strangways.

“Big, burly brute, isn’t he?” said Vivian, meditatively, “with enormous power in his uncouth hand. Why is it always given to those who use it worst?”

“To give us something to fight against. How soon we should slide into a life of sloth and ease, if we never met with any opposition. Strangways is invaluable to me as a sort of mental tonic.”

“Humph! A small dose of him would go a long way,” he said, doubtfully, for he had suffered acutely from too much of that sort of tonic in his own unpleasant suburb, and he felt that he could dispense with it gladly.

“Vivian, you came here to play cricket, and forget worries,” Colonel Witherington sagely remarked as he came up to him, with a pleasant smile. “Come over here, and beard the lion; you may get some fun out of baiting him.”

Unfortunately, just at that moment his name was shouted out, and he had to go off

in a desperate hurry to find his bat, and take his place at the wicket.

Later on in the day, there was an adjournment for tea, and all the company gathered round a table laid out under the trees, whilst the tent was left for the cricketers, and the lower class of lookers-on. Mr. Strangways was laying down the law as usual—leaning against the branch of an oak, with his thumbs in the arm-holes of his waistcoat. He was talking to Di Witherington, but Jack Montague was close by, as a self-constituted watch-dog. He knew her enthusiastic and impulsive disposition, he gauged the manufacturer's grasping nature as well as his iron will; and he felt that as no one else seemed aware of what was going on, he must do his best to protect her from him.

“We won't talk of these heavy subjects,” Mr. Strangways said, with his most amiable smile. “What do young ladies know of undenominational education, or the proper balance between capital and labour——?”

“ I assure you the balance seems all the wrong way,” Di interrupted eagerly. “ When I see capital in a palace like Greytowers, and labour starving in a hovel in Stanley Lane, I know enough for that.”

His face flushed angrily.

“ Am I to understand that you would like to see me in the hovel—me,” broadening his chest, “ and dirty, slovenly Mrs. Smith in my best arm-chair at Greytowers ? ”

Di laughed, as well as Flo and Phil, who were looking up from their strawberries and cream to enjoy the fun.

“ Not quite that,” the girl admitted magnanimously, whilst there was a merry flash in her large eyes ; “ but I confess that I should like to pick your pocket, and get Mrs. Smith a few more articles of furniture, besides a two-legged chair and broken bedstead.”

“ Much obliged to you, Miss Witherington,” with a short laugh. “ Am I to pay for all the coats, and carpets, and chests of drawers, which have gone down Smith’s thirsty throat ? ”

“No; Smith I give up. He is perfectly hopeless. But his wife goes to my heart.”

“Then, I’m quite disposed to envy her,” with what he meant for a charming bow.

“You must live in a hovel with no carpet, no dinner, and a broken roof,” put in Jack, with a sarcastic smile. “Miss Witherington’s regard goes up, as we go down. She never worships a rising sun.”

“Oh, but I mean to convince her that the higher we mount——”

“In what sort of way—on a pedestal of gold?” interrupting, with scant courtesy.

“I see no objection to it. Gold rules the world,” with a triumphant glance, meant especially for the impecunious curate who stood near.

“Not so sure of that,” drawled Lord Raymond, with a touch of “swagger” or “side” in his manner, put on for the manufacturer’s benefit. “There was once a little man—called Peter the Hermit, in a shabby old gown, without a penny in his pocket—who

dragged about a hundred and fifty thousand people over to the East by the power of his tongue."

"Or his faith," murmured Vivian.

"Then they were lunatics. I know nothing about 'em, but I can say as much as that."

"And Gordon's little stick, which ruled the heathen Chinees as well as the Soudanese, hadn't even a gold knob at the top," put in Jack.

"Think of Cleopatra and Mary Stuart," suggested Dandy; "think of the professional beauties of a few years back; think of the women of the present day," with a wave of his hand, embracing Em, and Di, and Flo, in one compliment—"does, or did, their danger lie in their gold, or in their charms?"

"I am the last man to deny the power of the ladies," said Mr. Strangways, with what he intended for an effective smile.

"The last and the first," put in Flo, with a mischievous twinkle.

"They give you a very bad character, Mr.

Strangways," said the Viscountess, looking like a dainty dabchick condescending to talk to a heavy barn-door fowl.

"He gave it himself instead of a christening present," muttered Jack, with his face rather near the brim of Di's sailor hat.

"They can't do that, your ladyship," replied the manufacturer sturdily. "Strangways & Co. can hold up their heads with any one in the trade."

"Ah, but Mr. Strangways himself, the private, not the public one. What do you say of him?"

"I say this, Miss Witherington," looking down into the pretty face which was regarding him with serious eyes, and yet half-smiling mouth, and feeling the power of her fascination through every fibre of his heavy body; "if ever there comes a time when you should want a friend, you would never find a truer one than Peter Strangways."

"Oh, but I have so many. It does not matter about me," Di rejoined, with a coolness

that was like a douche of cold water in the capitalist's face. "How about poor Mrs. Smith, and Mary Winter?"

Intensely irritated, Mr. Strangways said roughly that he left them to the care of their own delightful husbands.

"I don't think any one is in more need of a friend than a woman with a bad husband," remarked Vivian in his grave tone.

Em dropped her spoon, which Dandy picked up; but after a slight pause, she said quietly, "I know one friend who says, that husbands are the temptation from which we all pray to be delivered."

"Rather rough on men in general. No woman need trouble herself to pray to be delivered from me," said Jack.

"No, dear boy," whispered Em mischievously; "or she never would have asked you to her Thursdays."

"Oh, that terrible woman!" he answered with a laugh. "I could fancy her taking possession of a man, body and soul."

"I don't know that Aurelia Blake would interest herself much about the latter. She goes in for School Boards, and that sort of thing."

Vivian turned to her, with a sudden eagerness. "She may do it in the hope of improving them."

"Not in your sense; Aurelia is secular to the backbone."

"She must be utterly changed," in a low voice, in which intense pain was struggling with habitual reserve; "or perhaps, she may pretend to be not half so good as she is."

She gave him a quick look, and suddenly some vague idea of a story she had heard about those two flashed through her mind. "You knew her then?" she began nervously.

He drew his brows together as he answered her. "It was very long ago"—as if he were eighty at least—"and she must have forgotten me by this time."

"I don't think it at all likely," intending to be sympathetic, and say what would please him best.

His earnest "I hope to heaven she has!" took her by surprise, and made her feel as if she had put her small foot into a bed of nettles. After this he relapsed into silence, and it was evident that his thoughts were far away from Derwent's Cray. He had, in fact, gone back to a time in his life when he gave up comfort, society, friendship, and love, for the sake of a God-given vocation. How empty and bare his life had seemed when the wrench was made, and he stood in his first loneliness with his back to the world, his face towards privation, solitude, and toil; and yet, in spite of disappointments, and many pitiful failures, how rich and full that life had become, till, standing there, under the shadow of the old oak, with the memory of the past still strong upon his soul, he had not a wish beyond it!

"Just tell me, Mr. Strangways," said Di, in her soft young voice, breaking in upon his reverie, "if it ever comes to a contest between you and Mr. Vivian, do you think you will have a chance of success?"

“Not a chance, but a certainty,” throwing back his head, and squaring his shoulders. “So surely as I could take that china tea-cup in my hands, and break it into fragments, will I fight him in this matter of the School Board, and beat him every inch of the way.”

Vivian turned round quickly. “Perhaps you forget, Mr. Strangways, that this sort of business is not decided by brute force?”

“I remember that I have the power of food or starvation over 980 men out of the whole population,” he answered grimly, “and that is the sort of influence that tells in the polling.”

“Nevertheless, I believe that we should beat you,” exclaimed Di, as the colour rushed into her face, and her eyes flashed fire. She felt sure that a sort of hopeless despair had silenced the Vicar, so she spoke with the greatest confidence. “Mr. Montague, you will back us up?”

“Rather!” he answered warmly; “and if *you* promise to canvass, I’d defy the world.”

"No, no!" said Vivian hurriedly, "it's awfully good of you, Miss Witherington, but this is men's work, and much too rough for women."

Di laughed. "As if I kept myself wrapped in cotton wool!"

"I agree with Vivian," said Strangways gruffly.

"But would you if I were on your side?" looking up into his angry face, with laughing, but irresistible eyes.

"I should be a fool if I did," he admitted, with a short laugh.

"And which would you rather be, a fool or a knave?" she continued, unabashed.

"Out of two evils, I should choose the least—a knave," he said with great veracity.

"Happy man," murmured Flo. "It's not every one who can get his wish."

"I beg your pardon, Miss Kindersley"—in his harshest voice. "What were you saying?"

"I was only thinking what a happy man

you were," she said innocently. "You can always fulfil your own wishes with no one to control you."

"To a man who wishes to marry, 'single blessedness' is 'single cursedness,'" put in Jack, maliciously.

"Who says I wish to marry?" turning round upon him fiercely, as if he had accused him of a crime.

"No one—only you seemed to have bought everything you wanted, except a wife," he said coolly, whilst Di bit her lips nearly through, to prevent laughing, and Flo fled precipitately, in order to explode at a distance.

"That is true," he said with sullen gravity, "and yet women are to be bought any day of the week."

"*Some* women," said Di, with indignant emphasis.

"All women, Miss Witherington ; but mind you, not with cash," he said slowly. "Supposing that brother of yours were to get into

a difficulty, wouldn't you be willing to marry the first man who offered to pull him out?"

A sudden shiver ran through the girl, as her eyes followed Phil's slight figure on the cricket-ground. God help her, if she were ever in such a fearful position as Mr. Strangeways' words had conjured up!

"Only a beastly cad would care to make conditions in a case like that," broke in Jack impetuously.

The capitalist eyed him contemptuously. "Every service deserves payment."

"Are you never to give anything for nothing?"

"Never—the very first principles of trade are against it."

"You would do away with the last vestiges of chivalry."

"Possibly. I leave romance to you, and stick to common-sense. I find that quite sufficient for me," with an air of supremest self-satisfaction.

Feeling that he had taken the man's

measure exactly, and disgusted at the result, Montague turned away, picked up his bat, and walked off slowly with Di by his side.

"He is terribly strong, Mr. Montague," she said, in an unusual state of discouragement.

"Tough as iron, but we've got to beat him, and I bet we shall. There's Penrose out. Wish me good luck!" he called out, as he ran off.

"Not I," she answered promptly, though she was glad to think that they would be on the same side in the more serious contest of the future.

Stumps were drawn at half-past seven. In spite of Lord Raymond's involuntary good play, and Montague's superior bowling, victory declared for The Wilderness; and Phil threw up his cap in delight, and started a cheer which woke the sleeping echoes of the hills, and roused his startled mother into her frequent state of fretful complaint. A large and very hilarious party collected round the

Colonel's dinner-table. Em fascinated her host, whilst Lord Raymond still further perplexed his hostess, and Mrs. Montague built a wondrous castle in the air, as she watched Jack talking to Di Witherington with all his former light-heartedness, as if the "old man of the sea" had suddenly slipped off his shoulders. The Rector had gone home to his wife or his sermon, but Vivian and Benson stayed on, yielding very willingly to pressure, for the thought of a moonlight drive in the cool quiet night was a great temptation after hard work, or hard play, in the heat of the day; and they knew that a special charm would be given to it by some of the Colonel's far-famed cigars.

CHAPTER III.

A BURNING QUESTION OF THE DAY.

THE Wildgraves started for Scotland in their usual disjointed fashion—she in an ordinary first-class carriage with one or two special friends of both sexes, he in a smoking-carriage with three other men, and a miscellaneous assortment of pipes, cigars, novels, newspapers, and packs of cards. They were on their way to a ducal house, where sport ruled the day, and any other possible amusement, the night. Wildgrave shot grouse with a sure and steady aim, that was the envy of the other “guns” and the admiration of keepers and gillies, whilst Em fascinated the sportsmen at festive luncheons in the heather, or in the dancing-room after dinner. Altogether

they were considered a most successful pair, and the Duchess put a good mark against their names in her visiting-list. Montague went eventually to the Kingston's moor and enjoyed himself very much, though the sport at times seemed tame to him after his South African experiences, because deprived of all risk and danger. And yet there *was* a risk, for Miss Kingston seemed to regard him as a thing to be constantly shot at. Unlike the sportsmen, she never changed her game, and though she certainly aimed at his heart, she would have been equally content to bring him down by his head. Sentiment was really out of her line, but she saw no reason why they should not philosophise, or "theosophise" together through life, except that Montague seemed to have no inclination that way. By constant effort she hoped to bring him into a more pleasant frame of mind, but he was more provoking than he ever was before, for he would let himself be talked to for any length of time, without showing visible marks of

impatience. And yet, after giving her so much encouragement as that, he went away in as phlegmatic a mood as the one he had arrived in.

Lord Wildgrave paid a visit to the Kingstons on his way to somewhere else, and was much amused at the state of affairs. He called Jack "the hunted hare," and offered to bet him a fiver that Miss Kingston would run him down, before he went back to Derwent's Cray.

Montague was virtuously annoyed at the free use he made of Ida's name; but the Viscount was perfectly incorrigible, and all dignified remonstrances had only the effect of egging him on.

"Wire when it's coming off," he said with a mischievous twinkle in his eye, as he shook hands with Jack, before getting into the dog-cart which was waiting to take him to the station.

He chuckled with delight as he thought of his troublesome brother-in-law, tied to a

theorising chatterbox like Ida Kingston. Perhaps he would be less inclined to preach about the delinquencies of married men, when he had joined their number, and found himself stranded with an argumentative bore for a wife. Then would be the time to chaff him about his highly moral view of the position—a view which would probably be seriously modified when it became a personal question. For there is all the difference in the world between watching your neighbour suffering from his tight patent leathers, and being pinched by your own particular shoe. Then the world can see what stuff you are made of, and whether your endurance is only talk, or real fact.

In spite of Wildgrave's prophecies, Montague was still a free man when he returned to The Priory, and found it empty. He had come back earlier than he intended, or else Mrs. Montague, who had been away like the rest of her friends, would certainly have hurried home to receive him. The house

seemed to him strangely desolate without the gracious presence of his mother. She would have been so interested in all his doings, and he had such hosts of things to tell her, which now he must keep to himself, and forget long before she could listen to them. A fire was lighted in his den, which looked cosy enough to please most people, but he had a sort of hankering after human society, and neither his dog nor his pipe could satisfy him.

“Mr. Kindersley called yesterday to know when you were coming back, sir,” Mason remarked as he turned up the lamp. Happy thought! he would go and see the Rector, and soon he was striding down the drive between the stately elms, with his pipe in his mouth, and Ponto at his heels, wondering why he objected to the emptiness of the house so much, when he had borne years of loneliness before quite voluntarily.

When Montague reached the Rectory, he found Mr. Kindersley only just returned from Dainton. He was leaning back in an easy-

chair, in the attitude of a man thoroughly wearied in body and mind; but when Jack was announced, he rose to meet him with evident pleasure, and his face lit up with a welcoming smile, sufficient almost to chase away the shadows of anxiety and concern, which a moment before had held complete command over his features.

Montague apologised for the lateness of his visit, but the Rector assured him that he could not have timed it better. "You see in me an anxious, angry man, who very much needs to be taken out of himself, so you are doubly welcome. Sit down—and have a smoke," pulling forward a comfortable chair, and then stirring up the fire into a cheerful blaze.

Jack had been troubled by a few misgivings as to whether he ought to intrude on the Rector at such an hour, for he knew that he was generally busy either with reading or writing, whenever he chanced to have an evening at home; but all these misgivings vanished when he met with such a hearty

reception, and he dropped into the easy-chair, pulled out his tobacco pouch, and made himself quite at home. There was a strong bond of union at all times between these two friends, in spite of the disparity of years; and both were men of action, thoroughly honest in all they did and said. Jack had an unbounded regard for the uncompromising Christianity of the Rector, expressed not only in his sermons, but, which is far more important, in his life as well; whilst the Rector knew that under a somewhat reserved, abrupt, demeanour, there lurked an honest heart in Jack Montague, which he meant to make it the business of his life to gain. He felt acutely that much was lacking in the young fellow's life—much that needed to be understood, and carefully dealt with; and no one was better fitted to deal with such a subject than this courtly, kindly, cleric. Many a parish priest, with less knowledge of human nature, would have made the fatal mistake of at once attacking the citadel by violent assault, would have taxed Montague,

openly and solemnly, with his very patent disregard of Christian duty in absenting himself from public worship, and would have sought by direct questions to probe the secret of a sensitive nature. In doing so he would have made a miserable failure, caused the double locking of such a heart as Jack's, and conjured up a reserve which would have formed an impenetrable barrier to all further influence, and probably closed the friendship for ever. Not so the Rector. He understood his man—always spoke to him as if they were absolutely one in theory and practice—took him into his confidence about improvements in the parish, and waited patiently for his opportunity to speak heart to heart, until he could feel certain that even if unsuccessful, no barrier would be set up between them. And in this he was right. Jack, on his side, had already begun to love the man he had always respected, for nothing was so pleasing to one of his strong nature than to feel that he had won the power to be a welcome help in times of anxiety and

perplexity, to such a character as the Rector of Derwent's Cray. Mr. Kindersley put aside his worries at once, and talked for some time about Jack's experiences in Scotland. He was eminently sympathetic by nature, and threw himself with real interest into the pursuits of those about him. He was much amused at Jack's account of some of the whims and oddities of the sportsmen he had come across; and laughed heartily at the timid little woman who was dragged out shooting against her will, and lodged a whole charge of shot in the crown of her husband's hat. At the first pause, Montague accused him of looking worn out, and he pleaded guilty directly, as the smile vanished from his lips, and he leant back in his chair.

"I am tired, angry, and altogether in a most unchristian state of mind," he said wearily. "I always am after I've been to Dainton. I feel so thoroughly dissatisfied with myself, and everything in general."

"Then, why go? I should keep away; but

what brings about such an exasperating state of affairs?"

"Go? Of course, I must go. You know Vivian?"

"Not very well; but I like what I hear of him. I'm told that he's a quixotic, hard-working, high churchman, and I know he's a good cricketer," Jack added with a smile.

"Quixotic! If that means a thorough consistent Christian, then he is quixotic indeed. Jack, that man's a saint—I don't mean in the flabby conception of the word—a sort of stained-glass, angular, maudlin specimen of the genus homo, chiefly remarkable for a love of curious and many coloured vestments, and an inordinate affection for hair-shirts, and five o'clock tea," the Rector said with reviving energy, as he warmed to his subject. "No—Vivian has much that is most human in his composition; but what I do mean is, that he is *devoted* body and soul to his work. It is *the* business to him; and he is as fervent in it as any apostle could wish. And so he is

called *quixotic*! It would be a happy thing for England, if a few more of her children had some of the spirit of the Knight of Mancha. Christianity to the majority is a mere figment, a name which it is convenient to adopt, but which carries no responsibility with it whatever. And when any one, priest or layman, severs himself from the ordinary run of professed Christians, and undertakes the responsibilities imposed on him at his baptism, he is at once set down as a fool—an enthusiast—a person to be avoided."

"You astonish me! I thought you were all so satisfied with the improvement in church work. No one ever makes a speech about it without some allusion to the splendid state of things now, compared with that of fifty years ago."

"Yes, I know," regretfully, "we are all guilty of it; but be sure there is nothing to be proud of. Fifty years ago the light of this Church was nearly out, and no one should refer to it without shame or sorrow. Certainly

much has been done of late years, but nothing to boast of; and as for resting satisfied with the present state of affairs, why it would be absolutely suicidal. The demand upon the Church increases every day with the increase of the population, whilst the crowding of that population in large centres brings an overwhelming load of poverty and crime upon our great cities, which cries out for amelioration, as well as for conversion in its widest sense."

"I quite agree with you," broke in Jack. "The statistics make you shudder; but surely the Church is doing her duty now. I don't know from personal experience, but I heard Canon —— speaking the other day in London, in the most reassuring and confident manner, about the Church's present work amongst the masses."

"It's easy enough to talk like that when your facts are gathered from prepared statistics, or from an organising secretary of some society, who flies from place to place, shooting off sermons, and taking in offertories. But go to

the men whose whole life is passed amongst the masses; theirs is a vastly different story. Think of the dull monotony of a lonely life surrounded by thousands, and yet quite alone; the loneliness accentuated, and made heavy by the realisation of a hopeless weight of work. One man in a starvation living with the work of fifty to do—and all the time in this overcrowded and undermanned parish, a new generation growing up, which is being educated on a system which, if not anti-Christian, is decidedly antagonistic to the Church—which forbids the use of the Apostles' Creed, for fear I suppose lest it might form a foundation for a living faith, which teaches the rudiments of all sorts of ologies, and even playing on the piano—oh, the hideous farce! and keeps a child in ignorance of his duty towards God and his neighbour. And even thinking people are content to leave it so! Yes, I put you all in, Jack. The majority of the upper class know nothing, and care nothing, about this state of things."

"A terrible indictment! I never knew you so severe before," said Montague slowly, as he refilled his pipe; "and yet, 'pon my word, from what I've seen lately, I believe you are right. A fearful number of people are entirely wrapped up in their own selves and their own amusements. Summer and winter, it's all the same, and the man who ventures to introduce some serious subject, is voted a nuisance at once."

"I'm the last man to grudge them their amusements," the Rector said with a sigh, as he brushed back his hair with an impatient hand. "But God knows they needn't be at it, morning, noon, and night. They slave a great deal harder than most working men; but what will their wages be, when the end comes?"

"I believe many women mean to turn good when their hair turns grey."

"Then depend upon it they will persist in hair-dye till the last minute," with a grim smile. "But, thank goodness! they don't

come across my path. Flo, with all her fun, is a good little girl at heart; and I don't know a better, truer girl, than Di Witherington."

"No; she is one in a thousand," said Jack gravely, as Kindersley got up to poke the fire. As a bright blaze lit up the room, shining on the backs of the books in the well-filled bookcases, and bringing into relief every bit of gilt or brass-work on picture-frame or lamp, Montague's thoughts went back to a former remark of the Rector's, and he said, in a half-puzzled tone: "Surely things are not so bad as you paint them. Your enemies are always throwing your immense wealth in your teeth, and there must be some truth in it. Where is it all, in the name of goodness?"

"I tell you it's congested, or misapplied," said the Rector, leaning against the mantle-piece, but too restless to sit down. "The Church is like a mill, complete in every particular as to gear and machinery, with a fine wheel, and a splendid flow of water to

work it; but the human architects and mechanics who have control over the supply, have, by some blunder, turned that supply out of its proper course, so that the immense volume of motive power, *i.e.* money, goes in a wrong direction, and only a small stream, barely enough to turn the wheel, can be directly applied towards that most desirable object."

"You mean, I suppose, that the money is not equally distributed?"

"Precisely. It is obviously wrong that it should be allowed to accumulate in one canonry or living, and that another should be in a state of starvation."

"But how has it come to this? Whom do you blame, and what would you do?" Montague asked with interest, for this sort of earnest talk seemed refreshing to him after the banalities of society.

"I blame nobody; but I do blame the system of emolument, and I would alter it at once if I could. Look here, here am I,"

pointing to himself with an expression of huge disgust, as if he had lived on the fat of the land, and left his neighbour to starve, "with only fifteen hundred souls in my care, a comfortable rectory, a pleasant neighbourhood, and five hundred and seventy pounds a year; whilst there's Vivian in Dainton, in a wretched back-street, with an apology for a house, nearly seven thousand souls under *his* care, and two curates to keep, on a grand income of two hundred—and that, let me tell you, is not a bad living by comparison with others. But isn't it infamous that this devoted priest should be so put to it—as I know he is—in a rich church like ours? There is many a scholar whose chief recommendation to the priesthood has been a successful university career, and who has never borne the burthen of a parish for a day, receiving, at this moment, eight hundred a year or more in some Cathedral appointment, not for hard work amongst souls, but for fine scholarship in the Classics. It's wrong, I'm sure of it."

“Wrong? By Jove! I should think it was,” exclaimed Jack, indignantly. “But why on earth do you stand it? I should go on, like a second Cassandra, till I forced some Bishop or Archbishop to listen to me.”

Kindersley smiled at his energy, but he shook his head sadly. “They know it as well as I do; but the system is too much for them. They would point to the missionary work which is being carried on in so many of our Cathedral towns, such as Lincoln and Rochester, and say, ‘We are doing what we can, have patience.’ But I *can’t* have patience when I see the utter destitution of my poorer brethren, and know that they have as much right as I have to a good coat on their backs, and good food for themselves, their wives and their children. It’s heart-breaking! I knew a parson in Warwickshire, whose house was such a tight fit for his family, that his children had to sleep in hammocks down the passages.”

“Chilly work in winter,” said Jack quietly.

“Yes; and look at the contrast between the

priest in his cottage, and the bishop in his palace. The one with too much, the other with far too little. And I'm sure there are several members of the hierarchy who would be the first to agree with me. We don't want rich rectories, comfortable canonries, no, nor feudal castles for the successors of the apostles; but what we do want is the power to win souls for Christ, and we have *not got it*. More priests, more bishops, and a better distribution of the wealth of the Church, is what we all should seek after, and pray for. There now; I feel better." Having relieved his mind, the Rector thrust his hands into his pockets, relaxed his brows, and smiled on Jack, so that he laughed outright at the sudden change.

"Why, you are a red-hot Radical," he exclaimed, in pretended disgust. "I shall report you to your Bishop. You ought to be had up before an inquisition, and well branded as a warning to all other rectors. What would his Lordship say, if he heard you talk of the Episcopal Palace as a feudal castle?"

“Say? Why, agree with me, to be sure; and be the first to vote for any scheme which would strengthen the hands of the Church. You call me a Radical, but I’m not; I’m a true Conservative. I hate the Radical programme, and distrust it. But, before all things, I am a Christian, as every churchman should be; and, because I am a Christian, I am desperately afraid of being lukewarm or cold in any matter which touches the welfare of the Church, and the souls of the people. What I advocate is pure conservatism. We are always hammering on about the purity of primitive Christianity. Primitive Christianity did not house its bishops in palaces, or call them ‘my lord.’ Yet, I don’t suppose there was any loss of dignity on either count.”

“Perhaps not; but, personally, I should be much more inclined to ‘my lord’ the Bishop of——, than a Lord Mayor, or a dissolute Duke,” said Jack with a smile.

“And so should I, of course. There never

was a time when our Bishops were more devoted, more truly Fathers in God, than they are at present; but they are over-burthened, each one in his diocese with the work of six at least on his hands."

"Then, there's one class of men not likely to join the unemployed. But seriously, it's an awful state of things, and no wonder you take it to heart. I should write to the *Times*. That's my one idea when anybody has a grievance."

The Rector shook his head. "Won't do. That would bring the whole swarm of busybodies down upon us. 'Fools rush in where angels fear to tread.' Besides, to ventilate a subject is all very well, but if you open every door and window, the wind may come in, and blow you and your subject away. Don't go, Jack," putting his hand on his shoulder to stop him, as he stood up, shook the ashes out of his pipe, and replaced it in his pocket. "My wife will be delighted to see you, and Flo will never forgive me if I let you slip."

"But it's so late."

"They won't go to bed for an hour at least, and we shall find a cup of coffee in the drawing-room. Come along," going towards the door and opening it.

"One moment—here's the cheque I promised you long ago," getting rather red as he held it out. "I'm awfully sorry, but I quite forgot."

"Don't mention it. I appreciate your kindness from the bottom of my heart," the Rector said warmly. "Would you be kinder still, and give it to Vivian, instead of to me?"

"But why?" Not feeling at all inclined to jump at the suggestion. "I know you so much better than Vivian, and I'm far more interested in Derwent's Cray than in the other place."

"I know it is scarcely fair on you, but Vivian wants it so much more than I do. People have come forward so unexpectedly to help me; your sister amongst the number,"

with a kindly smile, for it was a rare pleasure to him to know that the girl who had lived most years of her life in that quiet village, never forgot its claims, amongst all the distractions of her London life. "And Vivian's school is in debt."

"All right—pass it on," after a moment's hesitation.

"Not I—go over, and give it yourself. See his face when the load of care is lifted from it, and you'll have your reward; and now, come, or the coffee will be cold."

The Rector led the way into the drawing-room, well-pleased that he had made an opening for a friendship between Jack Montague and Cyril Vivian; an object on which he had long set his heart. He was sure that the Vicar would win Montague's confidence, and he had great hopes of the ultimate good that would be likely to result from it.

CHAPTER IV.

PHILANTHROPY IN ITS SANEST FORCE.

A shrill whistle resounded through the dingy slums of Dainton, but the inhabitants of Wellington Row and Stanley Lane knew all about it, and therefore did not excite themselves. Presently, a shoeless little boy, with rough, untidy hair tumbling over a pair of uncommonly bright eyes, stopped in his game of "Hop-Scotch," and went running down the row in a hurry. Miss Witherington, who was the cause of this effect, gave him an approving nod: "That's right, Joe. Take care of Jumbo till I come back, I sha'n't be very long."

She lifted a basket out of her small cart, and then stepping carefully over the mud and filth, which acted as a disguise to the broken pavement, tapped at a door.

"She be werry bad, mornin'," Joe asserted, with a jerk of his thumb towards the door.

"I'm so sorry. Why didn't somebody send for me?" the girl asked severely, as if she were the parish doctor at least; and then, without waiting for an answer, she lifted the latch and walked in.

Mrs. Crutchley, whose son rented this noble tenement in Wellington Row, was seated on a chair near a scrap of a fire, with her head resting on some grimy pillows, supported by a broken horse. Her face was the colour of old parchment, her nose was pinched, her cheeks fell in, and her eyes were heavy with the apathy that comes from continual misery and the daily want of sufficient food; and yet, about the poor, weary unsatisfied mouth there lurked the shadow of a smile, as if under happier auspices, the poor woman might once have had a sense of humour.

"So sorry to hear you are so bad," Di said gently, as she took a limp hand in hers, and looked down on it with pitiful eyes.

“Bad? I’m allus bad; perhaps you’d tell me when I’m well; I mightn’t know it myself,” Mrs. Crutchley answered, in a voice that was harsh as well as weak.

“But you are worse to-day. Has the doctor been?”

“Ay, my son fetched ’im, or he wouldn’t ha’ come nigh one of us. Us as doan’t pay can’t expect wisits.”

“Nonsense, you ought to be visited just as much as any of us. I don’t know Dr. Prescott, but Dr. Blaine, the parish doctor at Derwent’s Cray, is as kind as possible to his poorer patients, and makes no difference between them and the rich.”

“Doan’t he, now?” with a sudden look of interest in her dull eyes. “That ere doctor is a wonderfu’ man, you woan’t find his likes in Dainton, I’m thinking.”

“But what did Dr. Prescott say of you?” not caring to enter into a discussion on the virtues, or vices, of the medical profession at that moment.

The woman proceeded to give an extraordinary account of her symptoms, as well as of the doctor's comments thereon, during which it was hard for Miss Witherington to keep her countenance. She was very minute in her description, and evidently proud of every fresh complication she mentioned in detail, but Di felt not a bit the wiser when it had ended.

"What does it all come from? Can you tell me that?" she asked, without much hope of getting a sensible answer.

Mrs. Crutchley raised herself, as if for a supreme effort. She clutched the wooden arms of her chair with a feeble grasp, she rolled her eyes round the damp walls of the room, and finally opened her mouth to explain:

"It's all along o' havin' no teeth," she said, with a remnant of pride. "Doctor says I can't domesticate my food. It's a long word with a powerful lot of meanin' to it, no doubt. Mrs. Tussler, she had nothin' but ulsters in her throat when she was took bad; but then she was allus a poor creature," with a quiver

of contempt about her nostrils for the neighbour who had not risen to the same dignity.

Di bit her lips, and turned away to take a pudding out of her basket. Struck by the dirtiness of the room, she began to wonder if she could not find some one to clean up, as well as to attend on the invalid.

Mrs. Crutchley shook her head when the question was addressed to her. "Not as I knows on. Plenty on 'em to make a muck. Ne'er a one on 'em but would turn the place inside out, and leave it with the dirty side uppermost."

"They can't all be as bad as that. Perhaps Mrs. Winter would be glad to have a job. Now mind you have this pudding for your dinner, and I will go and see. Good-bye, for the present."

With a bright smile to the invalid, Di went out, with a heavy burthen on her usually cheerful spirits. Mrs. Crutchley always sent her away with this sense of oppression. She seemed such a hopeless case. As a young

woman, she had been what is technically called a "palm-worker," from the leathern strap with the metal disc, which is worn on the hand—the round piece of metal on the palm performing the same office as a thimble on the finger. For several years she had supported herself and her boy by making sacks. It was Government work, and the pay was at the rate of $4\frac{3}{4}d.$ a sack. Working night and day she could scarcely make a living, and she was obliged to leave off when she was barely forty, for her hands were crippled and her wrists overstrained. The work had ruined her life, and yet there was a great blank left when she had to give it up. She was a proud woman, and she could not bear to be supported, after supporting others. Mike was a good son to her; but her husband had deserted her only two years after their marriage in a dismal church in the City. She had struggled on for her child's sake, working with the dull monotony of a machine, as unnoticed as a weed in the heart of a forest, with tired legs and aching

back, without one ray of light on the darkness of her life, except the smile on her boy's face. Years passed away. The child grew into a man, and married, as the poverty-stricken always do, as if it were cheaper to feed two mouths than one. Hop-picking brought them down from those dingy dens in Stepney or Whitechapel, to the sweet, fresh air of the Kentish fields. But the hop-pickers were crowded together in barns and outhouses; and in spite of the healthy air, Mrs. Crutchley Junior caught a fever from one of her companions; and when they went back to London to begin again the weary grind after daily bread, she was lying at rest in a quiet churchyard, all her labours ended, all her cares forgotten. Strange to say, the elder Mrs. Crutchley had no wish to change places with her daughter-in-law. Though her life seemed destitute of all attraction, she clung to it as affectionately as if she had a large balance at her bankers, which she would be obliged to leave behind. Mike, feeling lonely and strange

without his wife, took his mother under his wing, and settled down at Dainton as one of the hands at Strangways & Co. Disheartened by the lowness of the pay, and depressed by the loss of his wife, who had been an active, cheerful young woman, and kept up the spirits of the trio by her own bright example, the foolish fellow took to drinking. The small amount of money which composed his weekly wage was barely sufficient to keep a roof over his head, as well as to supply enough food for himself and his mother; and therefore he took the greater part of it to fritter away in beer and gin. The Hon. and Rev. Cyril Vivian tried both gentle remonstrance and stern rebuke. Di Witherington scolded and entreated. Mike promised both of them that he would never step inside a public-house again, and was found dead drunk on the doorstep of the nearest gin-palace, with a tract in one hand, and a pawn ticket in the other, only two days afterwards. After this, Miss Witherington was very angry, and said she

would give him up : but the Vicar only saw good reason for further effort, and regretted his own want of influence, wondering, in his customary humility, if Newcome or Benson would have succeeded better. Di went on from house to house, intending to wind up with Mary Winter. She was trying to solve a knotty problem in her mind, and her brows were drawn together in a thoughtful frown as she picked her way, basket in hand, through the mud. She was so deep in thought that she never noticed a tall figure in a shooting-suit advancing towards her, till Jack Montague stood straight before her, with an amused look on his usually grave face.

“Going to cut me dead, Miss Witherington?”

“Where did you spring from?” she asked in surprise, as they shook hands. “Nobody ever comes here except the clergy.”

“Is it a case of ‘No thoroughfare’ for everybody else? I was looking for Mr. Vivian; I was told he was somewhere about.”

“And so he may be; but you will find

it difficult to unearth him. Is anybody ill?"

"Not that I know of. Let me carry your basket," taking it from her as he spoke. "Now, where are you going to?"

"To call upon a Mrs. Winter, the wife of that poor man who was punished so severely for misappropriating a hare and wounding a gamekeeper, you know. I am going to ask her to take care of Mrs. Crutchley for to-day, at least."

"Why can't Mrs. Crutchley take care of herself?"

"Because she is very ill."

"Then, she won't be cured in a day."

"No, I know that," with a puzzled sigh; "but everyone else will expect a nurse if I provide one for this poor thing. And then I should be ruined!"

"Of course, why should it come upon you? An awful shame! Miss Witherington, will you do me a service?"

"Depends upon what it is," with a smile.

“ Will you let me provide the nurse for Mrs. Crutchley? Get this Mrs. Winter to come in every day, and do anything that’s wanted.” He looked down into her face, and saw doubt and hesitation in every line.

“ You are very good,” she began, hesitatingly.

“ Excuse me, I’m not at all. I have property in Dainton. I am bound to look after the people, and I don’t think you have a right to refuse.”

“ You are quite right. I have no right at all,” looking up at him frankly, “ only the people here seem to belong to me and Flo; and nobody, except the clergy, has ever given them a thought.”

“ Hasn’t my mother? ”

“ Oh yes, how wrong of me to forget! She is always very good to them in the winter.”

“ You want me to be a selfish brute, and leave them to starve? I will, if you like,” with a cloud on his face.

“ No, Mr. Montague. Help them as much

as ever you can, and I will bless you for it all my life," she exclaimed impulsively, ashamed of her own reluctance. "Now, good-bye, I am going in here," stopping at a narrow door which had once boasted a knocker, long since broken off.

"You will make what terms you like with Mrs. Winter, and I will pay her now this minute," pulling out a sovereign.

"Very well—this will go a very long way, but I will send you in an exact account. Poor thing, she lives upon making button-holes at $2\frac{3}{4}d.$ a gross; but now the work is slack, and she is almost starving, since her husband was sent to gaol."

"Good heavens! $2\frac{3}{4}d.$; is that the usual price?"

"I suppose so, or she would ask more. It takes me nearly an hour to make one button-hole, so I shouldn't make my fortune quite as fast as Mr. Strangways," holding out her hand for the basket.

"But it is monstrous; somebody ought to bring it forward in Parliament," surrendering the basket rather unwillingly.

“ Yes, and appoint a commission to stifle the inquiry, and call witnesses who would be dismissed by their masters for daring to give evidence against them ! I’ve no opinion of Parliament,” with which crushing remark, Di disappeared into Mrs. Winter’s premises, and Montague was left outside, with a smile on his face, and a conviction that district-visiting would be a delightful occupation in such company. He turned back, with the intention of trying his luck a second time at the clergy-house, for he had his cheque in his pocket, and he knew that the sight of it would remove a heavy burthen from Vivian’s mind.

Mrs. Winter was the beauty of Derwent’s Cray when Nat fell in love with her, uprooted her from her pleasant surroundings, and, determined to shake off the restraint of her old-fashioned relations and friends, planted her in dingy Stanley Lane, where she knew nobody but himself. Poor Mary was happy enough for a year or two, but when Nat took to poaching, she took to upbraiding him for

robbing the Colonel who had been so kind to her mother, and there were many hot quarrels over the game. He maintained that God Almighty put the hares in the woods, and he had just as much right to them as the Colonel himself. Mary told him that they were as much the master's property as the gold pin he wore in his scarf; but Nat was obtuse, and could not see it. In consequence of this obtuseness, he was now lodging at the Queen's expense in Rochester gaol, and Mary was living at her own expense in Stanley Lane. By means of those button-holes, which are ordered so carelessly by customers, and paid for so badly by those who sell the whole article, and look upon that part of it as only a trifling detail, she contrived to keep herself alive. It is hard to realise that a woman's life may hang on those neatly worked little slits for buttons, that the very bread she eats, the roof that covers her tired head, depend on the magnificent pay of $2\frac{3}{4}d.$ the gross!

Some brightness came into Mary's dark

eyes as she turned, and saw who her visitor was. Di's voice was very soft as she spoke to her with kindly friendliness, in which there was not the smallest taint of patronage or condescension. "He will be coming back soon, and then you will be so happy again."

"Ah! but he woan't be the same mon as when he went. It'll cut him to the heart, it'll. He'll be known as a jail-bird, and never haud up his 'ead agen. And he had such a sperit; a lord was naught to him, and the best pile carpet wouldna' ha' been too good for him to tread on;" and Mary wiped her eyes with the corner of her apron, dropping a tear to the tender memory of the poacher's pride!

Di sympathised with her just as much as if she had the highest opinion of the absent man, for she knew that Mary loved him as if he were the best husband in the world. All the bitterness of her married life had passed from the wife's memory, and she was ready to go with her Nat to the other end of

England, if he found Dainton undesirable, forgetting that if she had proved him untrustworthy in the South, there was no reason why he should acquire a fresh stock of virtues in the North.

“And are you very busy just now?” Di asked as soon as that had been sufficiently discussed.

“No, Miss; work is that slack, that I’ve had time to mend my own gown. I’m glad to do it,” she said simply; “only I could wish as how some one would pay me for’t.”

Then Di unfolded her scheme, and it did her heart good to see how the weary face brightened. Here was certain pay, probably for a fortnight straight off, and she could scrub a floor, or nurse the sick, without wearing out her eyes. She was ready to go at once; but Di slipped a few shillings into her hand, and told her to have her dinner first, for she was sure that she had scarcely tasted food that day; and then she began to be sensible of her own appetite, and to remember that the

luncheon-hour at The Wilderness would be long past, if she did not hurry home at once. But there was something still left in the basket, so, having left Mary quite happy, she betook herself to Mrs. Smith, whose husband, according to Mr. Strangways, spent all his earnings in "The Spotted Dog." Mrs. Smith possessed one solitary front tooth, a pair of watery blue eyes, and a tongue that never tired. It was said, in excuse of James Smith, that he was talked out of his home and into the public-house, by his wife's tongue; and Di, as she listened to it, thought that if divorce were ever allowable, Smith could advance a most powerful plea in its favour. She declined to sit down, and stood in the doorway, with a cold wind blowing down the back of her neck, and full into Mrs. Smith's mouth; but nothing stopped the continual flow about all sorts of heterogeneous subjects. 'The rheumatics in her back, she mentioned first, which took her just as she was crossing the kitchen, and fixed her so, that there she would ha' stuck like

Lot's young 'oman, if "the lady" next door hadn't come in to borrow a penn'orth of tea; and then she flew off at a tangent to the curate's sermon the night before, which was so 'doxical, that she couldn't make head or tail of its meanin'; and wound up with the pair of woollen stockings she knitted for her nevvie, when the poor little soul had gone where he'd want no feet at all, being purwided with wings on the premises; and as Di took to her heels and fled, she was pursued with a detailed account of all the people who had attended the child's funeral, and the black gloves on which Mrs. Smith had been foolish enough to spend her last penny—"out of doo respec'." Di laughed aloud as she made her escape, and almost ran into the arms of Mr. Newcome, who, looking very rigid and clerical, stepped aside in alarm, raised his squash hat gravely, and passed on as if he had all the business of the parish on his narrow shoulders.

"Thinks no more of me than if I were a cabbage-stalk," the girl decided most mis-

takenly, for she happened to be Newcome's ideal of girlhood, and for that very reason, and because the temptation to stop and talk was so nearly irresistible, he passed her by with the uncompromising air of a martyr, whilst he felt like a faltering, weak-kneed sinner.

"Joe, why weren't you at school this morning?" Miss Witherington asked with an air of severity which made no impression, as she dropped a sixpence at the same time into his dirty little palm.

"Guessed you'd come, mum," his black eyes twinkling at his own arrant humbug, "an' wouldn't be oot o' yer way for a' th' schools in th' place."

"But you couldn't have known it, Joe, and you ought to have gone," Di said as gravely as she could, for she knew how ready Mr. Strangways would be to prove that there was not a proper attendance at the school.

"Glad I didn't, mum," with a grin, "I doan't get no tanners at that there place."

Di drove off, with a laugh and a nod, for she

sympathised entirely with the boy. When the cupboard was empty and the table bare, there was more solid good to be got out of a sixpence than from a whole column of spelling ; and she knew that if the choice had been offered to her, she would not have hesitated for the sake of all the Education Acts in the world.

CHAPTER V.

A DAY'S SPORT.

COLONEL WITHERINGTON'S pheasants were so plainly asking to be shot, that he determined to give Phil a chance with his new "Purdy" before he went back to Oxford. The Kingstons were staying at The Priory on purpose for the shooting, for Charlie was a member of the Gun Club, and his reputation as a capital shot was made before his moustaches had been induced to grow. The Colonel considered him as a welcome addition to the party, and mentioned his advent as a further inducement to the Rector, who wanted no inducement, but simply permission to come. Kindersley was a keen sportsman, and watched Kingston and Montague with as much appreciation as old

Menzies, the keeper. He was no mean performer himself, and Menzies, knowing that he could count upon him, and probably out of respect for his pastor, always gave him a good place.

“Mornin’, Squire,” said the keeper, touching his hat, and looking from one to the other of the eight men before him, as if appraising their merits with his sharp ferret-like eyes.

“Capital morning, Menzies, with just enough touch of frost to make it pleasant,” rejoined the Colonel, cheerfully. “Think we shall do a good day’s work?”

The keeper shook his head doubtfully. “Mustn’t expect too much, sir, when you only rear six hundred birds. What’s that for eight guns to deal with?” with a look expressive of the utmost contempt.

“Never mind, I don’t want to shoot at a barn-door fowl,” and the Squire laughed good-humouredly, for this was an old bone of contention between master and man. “There’s twice the pleasure and the sport to be got out

of wild birds strong on the wing, than out of tame creatures whom you can't get to rise."

"They get a rise out of me, at any rate," said Jack, with a smile. "Now Phil, you keep your distance, or I know you'll mistake me for a pheasant."

"Not half good-looking enough," said the boy contemptuously, as he fixed his eyes on the keeper, all anxiety to know where he was to be placed.

"Mr. Kindersley, first on the right," said Menzies, as solemnly as any Lord Mayor, for he had no small idea of his own importance on these occasions. "Mr. Kingston, will you go next; not so near, sir, if you please. Mr. Montague, just by that clump of furze.—And I was going to put the young master next."

"By all means," said Montague, readily. "Boys always imagine that you've a pheasant perched on your hat, but I've no wife or encumbrances, and I believe I've made a will."

"I'll pay you out—see if I don't," cried Phil, as he went off to place himself according to

the keeper's directions. "Now, Colonel (to Colonel Maitland), will you take your place on the left?"

The other men—two young squires from the neighbourhood—were requested by the keeper to come back and walk down with the beaters, and the Squire himself, having surrendered the best places to his guests, was content to stay back, in order to catch any birds that might fly in the wrong direction. A few ladies had come out to watch the sport, amongst whom were Di Witherington and Flora Kindersley. The two girls, knowing that they were only there on sufferance, had quite an awe-struck expression of countenance, and having been cautioned not to speak a word, they conscientiously held their tongues, and felt as if they were engaged in some dark conspiracy. Flo was disposed to be aggrieved, for Philip had entreated her to come, and now that she was there, he was wrapped up, heart and soul, in the sport, and had not one glance to spare in her direction. It was a glorious morning; the frost was still

sparkling on the grass in the shade—for the Squire was too keen a sportsman to propose anything but a very early start—but the sun was hurrying up, and the last trace would soon disappear. The air was fresh and exhilarating, laden with the scent of the pines; and the view down the valley, where the river flowed through the brown fields and deserted hop-gardens, and the grey tower of the church stood out against its background of stately elms and wooded hills, had a new beauty lent to it by the golden October sunshine. But no one was thinking of the beauty of wood, and fell, and running water, for there was a whirr of wings in the air, and simultaneously, several shots rang out sharp and clear, and many a noble bird dropped down—a small heap of bright feathers on the damp grass—its swift flight cut short almost before it had begun. Some ill-natured person averred that the Rector's daughter was so excited that she could not refrain from giving a little scream, but she indignantly denied it; and Phil, who was far too much engaged to

know if she had, declared that he would stake his head that she hadn't. Di heard the scream, and knew where it came from, but she was not the sort of girl to peach on a friend, so she only looked mischievous, and as if she were on the point of telling, when she particularly wanted to tease. As they had begun so early there was time for four "drives" before luncheon. A great slaughter had been made, and a long row of dead birds, with a few rabbits and hares, was laid out under a hedge, to gladden the eyes of the sportsmen. Phil had really shot very creditably, but he came in for a good deal of chaff, Montague or Kingston always declaring if a bird looked much knocked about, that it was the one which had fallen to his gun.

"Take care that I don't 'wipe your eye' this afternoon," said Phil, with the confident air of an experienced twenty-year-old sportsman.

"My dear boy, you forget Mr. Montague has shot tigers and elephants by the dozen," put in Di with an amused smile.

"They are both so big that only a blind

man could miss them," he rejoined with a laugh.

"Yes, but you must lodge your shot in the right place, or you'll throw away your ammunition, and your life as well," said Jack quietly.

"I'll talk to you after luncheon," said Phil, with his eye on the game-pie, being too hungry to think of a retort.

"It's jolly to have something to look forward to," with gentle sarcasm.

"He will have all the impudence taken out of him when he has been at Oxford for a term," said Di consolingly to her next-door neighbour, who happened to be Jack.

"You are young enough to be sanguine, Miss Witherington."

"You are certainly not old enough to be the reverse," with a laughing glance up into his face.

"Indeed I am," with a sudden, impatient sigh; "I never hope for anything now."

"Because you have got everything you want?"

"By no means."

"Father, you are not looking after Mr. Montague, he wants something more."

"A thousand pardons, try this pressed beef," cried the Colonel, quite shocked at his own forgetfulness.

"Thanks, I have some already; Miss Witherington only meant you to see that her own plate was empty."

"Ah, you little humbug! I've a great mind not to give it you. How's your appetite?"

"Decreasing gradually, thank you; I'm not like Mr. Montague, for I'm nearly satisfied."

"Distract your mind from that beef, if you can, Miss Witherington," said Jack lightly, "and raise it to rather a higher level than the table, then tell me that you are satisfied, and I sha'n't believe you."

"I won't give you a chance of being so rude."

"You can't! At your age it would be impossible."

“I assure you that I ought to be the most contented creature in the world. Who has a happier life than I?” turning a beaming countenance upon him, which almost distracted his attention from her words.

He looked at her steadily, realising all the brightness of her young unclouded life, and irresistibly attracted by the sweetness, as well as the happiness of her expression. His heart beat fast, his pulses quickened, his voice had an odd sort of thrill in it, as he said slowly, “Still you must have hopes, hopes for yourself and for your brother, and there is no satisfaction for hope until fruition.”

“When Phil has got a first class with honours in Finals, that is the only fruition I want,” she said quickly; but she turned away her eyes with sudden shyness, conscious of a new expression in his.

“Why don’t you carry a gun yourself, Miss Witherington?” Charlie Kingston asked from the other side of the narrow table.

"Partly because I have a father who says it's unfeminine."

"Well, so it is. But where's the harm?"

"As I wasn't born a man, I don't want to be a bad imitation."

"I agree with you down to the ground. Where's the good of copying a bad original?"

"Exactly; and if women are to be like men, there would be so little variety in the world."

"Yes, to make it even we ought to go in for your line; but we can't. We are handicapped in every way."

"Pray, don't try; a womanish man is quite as bad as a mannish woman."

"I hate them both," said Jack, with energy. "They are the outcome of a worn out world."

"Yes, when women are tired of being women, and men are sick to death of being men—time to draw the curtain," Kingston said confidently, though he was the last man to wish that all the potentialities of the future should be extinguished by the sudden destruction of the world.

"Easy to talk," said the Rector, with an indulgent smile; "but I'm glad you can't draw it on your own responsibility."

"I fancy the tireddest man in the world would cry, 'Wait a minute,'" put in Jack, meditatively.

"A minute wouldn't content me," exclaimed Flo, who had been talking to Phil in a low voice, but now thought it was wise to join in the general conversation. "I've only just come out, and I want to go to balls, and all sorts of things—so don't be in a hurry."

"There would always be somebody to wait for," Kingston said, with a pretended sigh, as if he were longing to be free. "We should never get off."

"We shall never get off," if we sit here talking nonsense any longer," the Colonel said with growing impatience. "Are we going to try Binnies Coppice?"

"I'd a mind to, Colonel," said Menzies, with his head on one side, as if he wished to express a doubt as to the wisdom of the pro-

ceeding. "Not that we shall get many birds, for those interloping foxes have made a rare havoc amongst 'em."

"Don't abuse the foxes—they will soon be worth double as much as the pheasants. Ready, Kindersley?"

The Rector emptied his pipe, and stood up. "I only hope we shall do as well after luncheon as before," he said, cheerfully.

"Might ha' done a deal better," grumbled the keeper; "if it hadn't been for those beaters going too far on the right, a whole lot of as fine birds as you ever seed would never have given us the slip."

Most of the ladies owned to having had enough exertion, and went home in the little carts which had come to fetch them. The two girls went to The Priory, to see after Miss Kingston, who, to her own great annoyance, had been kept indoors by a bad cold. They found her sitting over the fire, with Mrs. Montague; and, in spite of a sore throat, she was indulging in a warm discussion with her

hostess. The widow was listening with rather an amused expression, but every now and then she would rouse herself, and combat any statement which did not square with her own theological views; and this with such ability and common sense, that her guest found a difficulty in answering her. Miss Kingston, like so many girls of this *fin-de-siècle* period, had a smattering of many things, but no deep-rooted knowledge of anything. She asserted, for instance, that Buddhism had a claim on our respect, because it was older than Christianity.

"This is quite news to me," Mrs. Montague remarked, perfectly unconvinced. "I never heard it stated before."

"Didn't you? How very odd!" exclaimed Miss Kingston airily. "Why, Gautama is supposed to have lived four hundred years before Christ."

"And Christianity began with the first prophecy addressed to Eve—according to our old fashioned dates, at least three thousand

six hundred years before Gautama ever stood under the peepul tree.”

“Oh, but if we date Buddhism from Gautama, we ought also to date Christianity from Christ.”

“Do—but you need not wait till Christ came down upon earth. It was the belief in Christ which kept the Jews together—in spite of their constantly recurring captivities. Every book of the Old Testament and the Psalms is full of the expectation of His coming. Ah! my dear girls, I’m so glad to see you,” she broke off with an air of relief, as Miss Witherington and Miss Kindersley were announced by Mason.

They seemed to bring a breath of fresh air into the warm room, and they certainly created quite a diversion in Miss Kingston’s thoughts, for she asked them eagerly after their sport, and Gautama was allowed to rest, for the time, under the dust of two thousand three hundred centuries in temporary forgetfulness.

Ida was a constant surprise to her hostess,

for she went with such sudden leaps from the most serious subjects to the most frivolous ; and Mrs. Montague was not aware that it was the fashion at many West-End dinner parties to eat soup to a discussion on Eternity, and ice-cream to a conversational review of the last burlesque at the Gaiety, or *vice versâ*. Society had changed in every way since the days of her youth ; and the world, to her old-fashioned eyes, seemed like a stage on which comedy and tragedy were inextricably tangled. Topics, which used to be talked of only in lowered voices, were now made the subject for an epigram, or discussed with a laugh ; whilst earnest thought and considerable trouble were given to the pursuit of idlest, emptiest pleasure. Her own daughter would ease her conscience by tossing a cheque to an impecunious rector ; but she would not think it worth while to ask how the money would be expended. She would not care to know if it would provide shoe-less Joe with a pair of boots, or Polly Winter with a dinner, or pay the doctor's bill

for Mrs. Crutchley ; but she would give most anxious thought to the modelling of her own lovely gowns, or to the arrangements for a ball. Everything seemed upside down to the widow ; or, as if she herself were standing on her head and viewing the world from that extraordinary position.

“Now, I must be off,” said Di, starting up from a comfortable seat by the fire, “for I’ve been away from my mother all day, and the dear old thing will be imagining that Phil has shot off my head.”

“I am glad he got on so well,” Mrs. Montague remarked, with genuine pleasure, as she gave her an affectionate kiss. “Jack says he has a very good eye.”

“But he chaffs him so unmercifully. However, Phil doesn’t mind a bit, does he, Flo?”

“Not the least bit in the world,” getting up slowly, as if loth to leave her seat.

“Go and lie down ; you will kill yourself with these long walks, you foolish child,” with a kindly smile, as she kissed the small, white face.

"Not I. I am going to dine at The Wilderness to-night," brightening up with an effort.

"Yes, it's Phil's last night. Oh, dear! we shall all miss him so awfully," with a sigh. "Good-bye, Miss Kingston. So sorry you can't come."

Di dropped Flo at the Rectory, and then drove home in the dusk. She stopped on the bridge to watch the shadows stealing over the river, and looked up at the pine-clad hills, dark and sombre as funereal plumes, with almost a feeling of awe. She was tired with her exertions of the morning, and sorrowful because she was going to be parted from her brother the next day. He and she were so much to each other; she sympathised in all his pursuits, although there were many of them in which she could not possibly join, and he came to her, whether brimful of delight at some piece of good fortune, or cross at any unexpected fiasco, or low at a bit of ill-luck. The Colonel was a reserved man, who suffered in silence, and never made much noise over

his joy. His soldierly life had taught him self-control, and he had exaggerated it into such a shutting up of himself within himself, that his children, tired of knocking at a closed door, gave up the idea of appealing to him for advice in any difficulty; whilst Mrs. Witherington had such an uncertain temper, that she could not be a comfort either to herself or to any one else. In consequence of the idiosyncrasies of their parents, the brother and sister were thrown upon each other, and Phil's absence during the Oxford term would leave a wide gap, which no one else could fill up. Di roused herself, impatient at her own dejection, shook the reins, and started off Jumbo at a rapid trot. Phil was not gone yet; and it would be time to mope when his hat was gone from the hall, and his whistle to be heard no more about house or garden. Just turning in at her own gate, she met The Priory dog-cart driving out, and Jack immediately pulled up to tell her the results of the day's sport.

"Five hundred head, with a few hares,

rabbits, and one cock. Not bad, considering," said Jack, cheerfully.

"Who shot the cock?" asked Di, for she knew that a woodcock was the prize of any bag.

"I did," and Kingston leant forward, "but this mean fellow claims it."

"Don't believe him, Miss Witherington. I shot it; and the Colonel has given it me to take home to my mother."

"Or rather to my sister. But *I* should like to have presented it to you," with a fervent glance.

"Thanks. I should like to be sure it was yours to give," and with a laugh and a bow, she went on up the steep drive which led under over-arching trees to the marble-pillared portico of The Wilderness.

CHAPTER VI.

AN EXAMPLE OF THE CHURCH MILITANT.

JACK drove over to Dainton a few days afterwards, to keep an appointment with Vivian. As he walked into the Vicar's study, he cast a rapid glance round it, and decided that it was exactly what he should have expected it to be from the character of its occupant. There was nothing, however, exaggeratedly ascetic, or poverty-stricken about it. The furniture was simple but good of its sort, only the word "comfort" had been left out of the category of necessities, and the one uncompromising, brown leather sofa might give you a back-ache, but certainly was not calculated to take it away. There were no pictures to clothe the terra-cotta coloured walls, only a large

crucifix hung over the mantel-piece—the cross in ebony, the Christ most exquisitely carved in Parian marble. It was a gem, picked up in Rome several years before, when Vivian's pockets were fuller of cash, and his life less full of opportunities of giving it away. There were many books on light oak shelves—most of them in shabby bindings, but of high theological value, for Vivian was a man who set great store by reading. He said if he were always taking it out of himself by preaching, he must equally put it in to himself by reading, or presently his brain would present a vacuum.

He was going through the school accounts when Montague came in; but he pushed them aside at once with his usual courtesy, and gave him a warm welcome. It was his wish to be accessible to every one at all times, and he rarely let his work interfere between himself and one of his parishioners, unless it was a time of unusual pressure.

Montague was shy of bringing out his

cheque; and soon started Vivian off on the subject that was like a dead weight on his mind.

"I tell you what puzzles me," Jack began, after offering a cigarette to his host, and taking one himself. "I left England three or four years ago, when the Education Act was a thing of the past, and the storm, which I am told it raised, was long since forgotten. Now people wake up, as if they had been asleep, and say that something must be done. Why didn't they do it at the time?"

"Because men are politicians first, and Christians—possibly—last. The whole question is one of Christianity versus modern politics. We have come to such a pass that men will promise and undertake anything for party-purposes, and if religion gets in the way, she must go the wall, or into the gutter, like a child's perambulator on a public path. The Nonconformists, you know, form a large and important community. It was necessary to bring them round. They were jealous of the

Church, and the Church's schools. A big sop had to be thrown them, and this sop was 'secular education.' No matter if the country toppled on the verge of atheism, their votes were gained, and that was the only object, in spite of tall talk and all that sort of high-falutin', for which that shameful stake was played! It has become the curse of England, and it will prove her ruin," Vivian said sternly, as his eyes flashed with the fire of his indignation.

"That is just what Kindersley says; but how is it that so many men, who are really not so bad in their way," said Jack, with a smile, "go in for it, and stand up for it through thick and thin?"

"Because they do not follow it out to its consequences," he rejoined more quietly, as he clasped his hands round his right knee. "And they are led into error by what they fancy is an Englishman's love of fair play. But I ask you if it is fair play to rob the Church of what has been her heritage, for century after century?"

“Certainly not. If robbery becomes fair play, it would be a new gospel for burglars.”

“Just consider this,” said Vivian slowly. “Secular education has no effect on the moral life, except in so far as it teaches that sin is to be avoided because of its effects. Now, there are several sins which may enrich a man, and even further his purposes in other ways—and yet be detrimental to society. He won’t hesitate to commit them, however, because secular education adapts a man to take care of his own temporal welfare ; but it omits to teach him to take care of his neighbours as well. Self-negation is outside its curriculum. Humility forms no part of its system. They are the very basis of Christian thought and action ; therefore the good Christian will make the best citizen.

“But you are not against the education of the masses ?”

“I am in favour of the greatest possible amount of education ; but it must be based on Christianity. In this, as in all other ques-

tions, it is at issue with the world ; and on one side or the other, men must take their stand. Now is the time to speak, for a great crisis is at hand. The question allows of no compromise. There are only two ways of solving the difficulty. We must either have education based on dogmatic Faith, or we must have education without any religion at all," looking straight into Montague's face with earnest eyes.

"I can't believe that we should ever come to that," said Jack, throwing away the end of his cigarette, and leaning forward in the interest of the debate. "Why not let each sect support its own schools? That is what I suggested to Strangways, but he did not seem to see it at all."

"Of course not ; because, with him it was a question of pocket—not principle—as it is with so many others. The anti-Catholics, who have no creed of their own, are always wanting to rob us of ours ; and Christianity has to stand aside, like a voiceless ghost, at the bidding of

freethinkers and atheists. Isn't it enough to make the men who have died for their Faith rise up against this generation, and condemn it?" he asked, his voice husky with the strength of his feeling.

"But how have we come to this awful pass?"

"The world is fond of compromise, and the conscience-clause, by which a parent can insist on his poor child being brought up as an atheist—the clause by which we churchmen are bound to our infinite degradation, is the outcome of its compromise with unbelief."

"I could understand it better if infidelity had made as much progress in England as in France," said Jack thoughtfully. "We have never had a Goddess of Reason enthroned on our altars."

"Not quite that. The Puritans desecrated our churches when they stabled their horses in them; but this was through fanatic hatred to what they called 'superstition,' and not from want of faith. But what can we expect

from our future leaders ? ” Vivian asked with a despondent sigh.

“ They are taken very early from home influence, whether parental or parochial, and thrown amongst a crowd of boys in a public school, where religion is considered of less importance than any of their other studies. Their preparation for confirmation is, in nine cases out of ten, purely formal ; and few attempts are made to help a boy individually, which is the only way of doing him any practical good.

“ And then these boys develop into legislators, and so-called churchmen, without any sort of knowledge of the claims, the constitution, or even of the history, of the Church. Can you wonder at the consequences, the compromise that the world is always making with sin, the superiority of the world in the world, notorious evil-livers not only accepted but *petted*, gilded vice courted and bepraised, poverty-stricken virtue despised and trampled in the gutter ? We know that one day the

world's verdict shall be terribly reversed ; but now, at this moment, every follower of Christ should raise his voice against it, or never dare to say, '*Non mea culpa.*' "

" You are right," said Jack gravely ; " but it's precious hard. When I was staying in London this summer, I saw a connection of mine going ahead without the slightest moral restraint. I couldn't exactly lecture him, but when I ventured to say a word, he only laughed, with the most exasperating good-humour."

" Good-humour is often another name for callousness, and it's harder to deal with than almost anything else. A man, who never denies himself any enjoyment, who insists upon having his own way, who satisfies every wish of his selfish heart, can afford to be good-tempered. What is there to ruffle him? He prides himself on not being narrow-minded—and let me tell you that the cant about broad-mindedness is one of the dangers of the present day."

“ I know Strangways has the impudence to say, that we are the most narrow-minded set he ever came across,” and Jack gave a contemptuous grunt.

“ Of course he does,” as he stood up with his back to the fire. “ He and all his set call it broad-minded to pull down the barriers that the Church has raised between herself and unbelief, and to banish Church doctrine from our schools. It is nothing of the sort ; it is another phase of gross intolerance. We never stirred a finger to interfere with their schools, so why, in heaven’s name, should they presume to interfere with ours ? ”

Jack shrugged his shoulders. “ Pull down the palings of Greytowers, and let the mob in. See if he will call that broad-minded.”

“ Not he ; he would take away our privileges without a scruple, but if we laid a finger on his property he would cry, ‘ No spoliation,’ and send for the police. If there were an ounce of honest feeling in the opposition to us, I should not mind it half so much ; but upon

my soul, I don't believe there is," said the Vicar emphatically.

"And yet there is a vast amount of good feeling in the world," Jack said more cheerfully. "Witness the stream of gold that literally poured like a flood into General Booth's pockets, directly men realised the urgent need."

"True—and all honour be to the man, who planned a really noble scheme."

"Then, you approve of it?"

Vivian smiled. "I do, and I don't. One thing, I have a fierce jealousy for the Church's honour in this matter. The task is hers to rescue the poor from the depths of sin and starvation, and I don't see why she should let it slip into other hands.

"Then why didn't she propose something of the sort?" Jack felt obliged to ask.

"Ah, my dear fellow, we don't beat a drum and blow a trumpet, but we do steady work when we get the chance; and I'll venture to say of our work that, if it is slower, it is also more lasting. It is founded on something

more solid than an hysterical conviction of so-called conversion."

"Have you ever been to any of their services?"

"Yes, on several occasions, and I must confess that I did not like them at all. I thought that the way they wound up some poor sinner to a state of almost frenzied exaltation, in which he paraded his sins for the benefit of a curious crowd, and received an assurance that he was saved, or as they put it 'Safe in the arms of Jesus,' was a mere parody of our confession and absolution."

"But I suppose they have done some good amongst the people you cannot get hold of?"

"I'm the last man to deny it. On the contrary, I look upon the Salvation Army in the same light as many other dissenting movements—namely, as an object-lesson sent by God to teach the Church a duty, which at the time she is neglecting. We learnt much from both Wesleyans and Quakers."

"And what lesson can you get from Booth?"

with a smile, as he thought of Professor —— with his “corybantic Christianity.”

“That the Church’s system had become too exclusive, that there is too broad a line between the clergy and the people, too much state to be kept up by our ecclesiastical dignitaries, and that we have grown too formal in our evangelical efforts. We try after the very lowest depths of the submerged tenth; but we must go down to the masses, and not expect the masses to come to us.”

“But I met a fellow the other day who said that an astounding work was being done in South London, and the East-End, by a small band of clergy and lay-helpers.”

“Quite true, an infinitesimally small band,” said Vivian bitterly; “and that’s just where the wrong is. Why shouldn’t it be a thousand strong? Of course it should. We’ve got the men—the right sort of men too—well educated, full of faith and zeal, ready to go into the forefront of the battle; but they are held back by lack of fortune. It is a scandal that in nearly

all our densely populated livings, when the authorities have to look out for priests, they are forced to select, not the men best fitted for the posts, but those best equipped with this world's goods."

"Then I suppose you agree with Kindersley that there ought to be a redistribution of the wealth of the Church?"

"Precisely. We want more Bishops with smaller incomes, and no purely ornamental officers in the Church Militant."

"It's a thousand pities that you did not get a portion at least of the Booth fund. You had an undeniable claim upon it by your labours amongst the poor," Jack said, as he pulled out another cigarette.

"It is sensationalism that attracts the public ear, and there is none in our quiet way of going to work. There were thousands of breaking hearts in South London when our mission first began, but they did not make much noise in breaking. Now some of these poor creatures find that there are people to

care for them, and help them, they no longer suffer from that terrible feeling of isolation, as if they were separated by a gulf far broader than the Thames, from all their happier, better-fed fellow creatures."

"It is something to bring them within touch. But after all," said Jack, leaning back and watching the grey smoke floating over his head, "I don't see how these poor beggars can be kept from getting drunk. Imagine an ill-ventilated, ill-drained, disgusting den for a home, with a public-house staring you in the face, on a cold winter's night, with its cheerful fire, its brilliant gas lamps, and its doors temptingly ajar. How can you expect them to keep out?"

"I don't; but it is obviously the Church's duty to attend to the bodies as well as to the souls of her members. To attempt the one, without the other, is to work in vain. Did you ever hear of what Kindersley calls my 'public-house fad'?" Vivian asked, his grave face lighted up with an expression of amusement.

“No; and if you go in for teetotalism, I give you up,” exclaimed Jack, with animation. “Much we should like it if some interfering busybody laid violent hands on our clubs, so that when we called for a ‘brandy and soda’ they could offer us nothing but a cup of tea!”

Vivian shook his head. “Far too many ‘brandies and sodas’ are drunk; but I’m not a teetotaller. I always maintain that the British climate, and consequently, the British throat, require something stronger than water.”

“You are perfectly right. I look upon you as a man of sense.”

“More than my Bishop did. I got into fearful hot water with him,” Vivian replied, with a quiet smile of amused reminiscence, “because I proposed to buy up the public-houses, and *not* turn them into coffee-houses. There are a good many philanthropists already, but there would be a great many more, if they saw a chance of joining a small profit to their benevolence. I should form a company, and persuade the people of the neighbourhood to

join it—brewers and all, for the express purpose of buying up every ‘public’ in the place.”

“But what earthly good would you do by that?” asked Jack, looking fairly puzzled.

“This,” said Vivian confidently; “good and wholesome liquor would be sold; a decided check would be put on drunkenness, for no man would be allowed to get drunk on the premises, and the publicans would not be *paid by results*, as is the case now.”

“How do you mean? I suppose the more business, the larger pay?”

“Not at all. We should employ respectable men as publicans, such as retired soldiers, &c., who deserve well of their country, and are accustomed to discipline, and place them above temptation by giving them a fixed salary. They would be under the supervision of the Board, for our Inspector would have a right to drop in at any moment during business hours, to see that our orders were carried out.”

"And what would those orders be?" Jack asked, as he followed the plan with increasing interest.

"A landlord should have the power to refuse to sell any more drink to a consumer, who had had enough. There could be no fixed rule, as one man can stand, and one man needs, more than another."

"But if A. could not get it at The Fox and Hounds, he would slip round the corner to The Spotted Dog, and make a beast of himself if he chose."

"Not if every house was in our hands. That was where my plan fell through, because funds failed, and The Spotted Dog was crowded with the people we turned away from The Fox and Hounds. But if we had money to buy them all in, we could checkmate the drunkard at last."

"They would outwit you somehow—send for liquor, and get drunk at home."

"I don't think so; their homes, for the most part, are so cheerless. They like a

smoke, a bright fire, a cheerful gossip, and a glass of beer ; and there is no harm in any of them when used with moderation."

"Hear, hear," said Jack, solemnly. "

"We might give them newspapers, draughts, and dominoes—in fact, anything in the way of innocent recreation."

"Stop a bit ; if you make them too attractive, you will expose yourself to the charge of tempting men from their homes."

"Not a bit of it. Working men, as a rule, in Dainton, if they've nothing better to do, when they are not getting drunk in the public-house, loaf about the corners of streets. They don't sit at home twirling their thumbs."

"People will call it Utopian."

"They won't, if we make it pay ; and it's bound to. There's nothing like a profit, however small, for making people see that you are practical "

"But I don't see where the profit would come in. You would make a point of selling the real unadulterated article ? "

“Of course we should, and yet I’m convinced that we should not only pay our way, but after a year or two, get 5 per cent for our money at least. We should do everything in a business-like way—have a Board of Directors.”

“The Rev. Cyril Vivian, Director of the Public-house Company! How well it will sound!” and Montague laughed heartily.

“They will say that the Church has her finger in every pie,” rejoined Vivian, with a smile, “but that is better than being shelved out of sight or hearing as some people would be glad to see her.”

“You will go in for the theatres next, and have moral plays acted by immaculate actors.”

“No, no. I may safely leave them to the County Councils. Must you go? You won’t stay, and have some luncheon?” the Vicar asked, true to his hospitable instincts, though characteristically uncertain as to what the fare would be like.

“Thanks; I must get back. I’ve friends

at home. But I'm to understand that you intend to fight this question of the School Board by every means in your power?"

"Fight? Yes—as long as I've breath to speak with, or a farthing to spend on the cause," throwing back his small well-shaped head, with an indomitable spirit shining in his eyes.

Montague glanced at him with involuntary admiration of his pluck. "I wish you success all round, and perhaps this will help you," he said, quietly, as he slipped the cheque into the Vicar's hand; and then added hastily, as the colour rushed into Vivian's face, and words of warmest gratitude to his tongue, "Don't thank me—thank Kindersley. He asked me to pass it on to you."

The next moment he had bolted, and the clatter of his horse's hoofs roused the echoes of James' Street, whilst Vivian still stood half-way between the fireplace and the door, with the important scrap of paper in his hands, looking as surprised as if it had dropped from

the gas-lamp over his head. It would go far towards paying off the debt on his school, and thereby deprive Strangways of his strongest argument in favour of a Board; and, as Vivian realised how one difficulty after another was being cleared from his path, and how his one small spark of hope had brightened into a flame, his faith in an all-presiding Providence was immeasurably strengthened, and he murmured a fervent "Thank God" from the depths of his heart.

CHAPTER VII.

“MR. MONTAGUE—DO STOP A MOMENT!”

MONTAGUE soon turned out of High Street with its fashionable shops and smartly dressed damsels, who in outrageous hats paraded the pavement in couples, looking down their cheeks to show off their eyelashes, or exchanging languishing glances with each other in order to attract the passer-by. Turning his back on all these delights, he rode down Wellington Row, where the appearance of a well-dressed man on a thorough-bred might have been as startling as that of a soldier in a nunnery; but the children scarcely troubled themselves to get out of the way of Prospero's hoofs, and a virago who was scolding her child, only cast a sullen glance in his direction, and

continued her stream of invective with stolid indifference. The poor, who never have quite enough to eat, and who know nothing beyond the daily round of want, and struggle, and hopeless waiting, often sink into an apathy as deep as that which is the result of a Mussulman's creed. To them the great question is how to fill the vacuum within, for nothing narrows the interests of life so much as hunger. They did not suppose that the gentleman had come to give them either food or work, so they let him go by with no excitement as to the why, or the wherefore of his presence. If asked, he would have told his questioner that he had come to test the state of roof, and door, and wall, and window, in this poverty-stricken hole, to see with his own eyes how these people were living, and how they were lodged. He did not understand why the place looked so much dirtier, and so much more "slummish" than it did the other day. When he turned it over in his mind he remembered that it had then been filthy under foot, and that every

face that his eye lighted on, looked as if it had a more intimate acquaintance with the coal-cellar, than some of the empty grates ; and yet, he had not felt half so much depressed by it as he did to-day. Really he was almost ashamed of having a good shooting-coat on his back, when so many of the women about him had nothing but ragged shawls, which seemed better adapted for letting the wind in, than for keeping it out. The conversation with Vivian had given him much to think over, especially the few sentences the latter had uttered about the compromise of the world with sin. He had seen it exemplified in every ball-room he had been to in London, again and again ; in every scene where men and women of the world met together. He had been disgusted to see the divorced husband of some ill-used wife rejoicing in his ill-gotten freedom ; and actually welcomed with urbanity by anxious mothers, who had too many daughters ready for the matrimonial market ! His own motto had always been, like Vivian's,

"No Compromise," and yet he knew that he himself, in his inner self, was a miserable example of a compromise with conscience. There was a wrong twist in his life, and he was terribly conscious of it; and yet amongst his many schemes for setting to right the small world in which he lived, there was no place for his own betterment. His thoughtful eyes went right and left as he rode slowly down the narrow street, noting the rotten cabbage-stalks lying in the choked gutter, the hole in the roof which let in the wet, and made that stain on Mrs. Smith's wall, which he could see quite clearly through the open door; the bit of rag stuck in a broken window obscuring the light, and not doing much to keep out the draught; the pinched face of a little waif, who kept her buttonless frock together with one thin claw, whilst she held out the other for a "ha'penny." A halfpenny was the height of her ambition, and her wild, dark eyes shone like two stars when Jack stooped down, with infinite pity in his large

heart, and dropped a shilling into her wasted hand.

“Go home, out of the cold wind,” he said kindly, as in spite of her exuberant delight the little thing shivered in her rags.

“Lor’ bless ye,” she replied, with the air of an old woman, “I’s used to it. Makes no odds to me whether it’s street or ’ome. No fire in one or t’other.”

And then, with a latent suspicion that perhaps he might repent of his generosity and take the shilling back, she closed her fingers tight over it, and ran off with astonishing speed.

Stanley Lane lay at right angles to Wellington Row, and there was not much to choose between them.

“The most depressing hole I ever was in !” was Montague’s verdict, as he looked from one end of it to the other, and saw no trace of the pony-cart which he had caught sight of on his way to the clergy-house. Lord Wildgrave would have delighted in telling him that it

was no exalted altruism which had brought him to these unsavoury localities, but only the force of attraction which exists between a pretty girl and a man with eyes in his head—a feeling which he might have shared equally with any empty-headed, sentimental schoolboy. Needless to say that Montague would not have allowed it for a moment; and yet it is a fact that he felt a huge pang of disappointment as he searched the narrow street, and saw no animal but a limping mongrel, no vehicle but a dilapidated wheelbarrow. It is true that he was not a member of the Charity Organisation Society, and that he did not pretend that he lived for the express purpose of improving the dilapidated lives of the impecunious; but he really fancied that it was only an exalted motive which had brought him to this unpleasant place. But this same motive was largely mixed with another, for there is scarcely a single action of our lives which is not the result of many complex wishes. He honestly meant to acquire in-

formation about the status of the poor, but he also wanted to see a certain brown hat with brown feathers, whose dark setting formed an effective contrast to the bright face underneath; and because he could not catch a glimpse of it, he rode on in a dissatisfied state of mind. But he had not gone more than a few paces, when he heard the very voice that he had been listening for calling him by name; and, looking quickly round, he saw Miss Witherington standing at the small gate which gave access to Mrs. Crutchley's house.

“Mr. Montague, do stop a moment!”

He was off his horse and by her side without any loss of time, only too glad to find that he was wanted.

“Have you seen Flora Kindersley?” she asked eagerly, and he noticed that there were tears on her heavy lashes, whilst her cheeks were unusually white, and her lips were quivering. “I want her to go after Dr. Prescott. Mrs. Crutchley is in such dreadful pain, and he hasn't been near her for a week.”

"Miss Kindersley is nowhere to be seen, but I'll go after the doctor. Only tell me where he lives."

"Oh, thank you ever so much," with great earnestness. "Five Victoria Terrace—with a brass plate on the gate. Do tell him to come at once. It is so—so fearful to see her," shuddering at the thought of it.

"If he's there he shall come, you may depend on it," said Jack, with great determination in the set of his chin. "But"—he turned, with one foot in the stirrup—"you oughtn't to be here: it's too much for you."

"I only wish I could bear it for her," she exclaimed impulsively; and then she ran back to take her post by the bedside, whilst Montague rode off as fast as he dared to go, when swarms of children had taken possession of the roadway. He found Victoria Terrace without any difficulty, and was relieved to hear that Dr. Prescott was at home, and engaged with his dinner.

The fragrance of a beefsteak was wafted to

Jack's nose, but he ruthlessly requested that the doctor would come at once to Mrs. Crutchley, Stanley Lane. The doctor was open to impressions like other men, and it is possible that the sight of Mr. Montague of The Priory on horseback at his door, caused him to hurry over his last morsel more quickly than he would have done, if little Joe had been employed as the messenger.

He was a short, stout man, with grey whiskers, and clean-shaven lip and chin. He looked as if he had fought his way through the world, and was game to do it to the end. He brought out his bicycle with him, like a practical man, and assured Montague that he would be in Stanley Lane as soon as he was.

"I knew that it was only a question of time," he said, with a slight attempt at an apology for his neglect, "so I could do no good by going to see her."

"Couldn't you have lessened her pain?" rather stiffly.

"Drugs are expensive, Mr. Montague," get-

ting on to his bicycle slowly, as if he were deep in thought. "I can't afford to give them away right and left, nor could I send the bill after Mrs. Crutchley when she was gone. Good-morning."

"Send the bill to me by all means, and do all you can for her," Jack said quickly, as he rode after him. Then he held in his horse, and let the doctor get to Stanley Lane before him, for he knew that his presence was more needful than his own, to say the least. And yet he did not like to go quietly home, as if he had no thought or care for the poor, suffering woman, or for her amateur nurse. He could not be in the way if he stayed outside, and it would only be proper to ask if he could do anything, or be of the smallest service, he reflected; but when these reflections brought him in sight of Mrs. Crutchley's door, he saw that Flora Kindersley had arrived, and was sitting in the pony-cart at the gate; and he caught sight of Vivian just coming away. Evidently there were plenty of people to look

after Miss Witherington and her patient, so he turned his horse's head, and, remembering that he was very hungry, betook himself to the "White Hart," where he had a hasty luncheon before returning home.

There was something specially attractive to him in a girl who could enter into all the sorrows of her humbler neighbours, and yet not shroud herself in a prim, forbidding sanctimoniousness. Looking round on the various girls of his acquaintance, whether "fast," with an inclination for flirtations and furtive cigarettes, or "slow," with a propensity for doddiness and meagre enjoyment of unforbidden delights, or neither the one extreme or the other, merely the ordinary conventional type, with nothing to single them out from the run of usual young spinsters, Di. Witherington struck him as the happiest of them all. She was doing her duty, quietly and unselfishly, both to those at home and those outside. She was infinitely patient with her own self-worried mother ; always cheerful, as the bird who sings

in sunshine or rain—always ready with her pity or encouragement according as the occasion required. She made a pleasure of her duty; but not, as so many do, a duty of her pleasure. Pleasure was most acceptable to her happy nature, and she threw herself into it with the keenest enjoyment. Jack had studied her closely, and come to the conclusion that he could not see a flaw, for even her faults were welcome, because they saved her from being a tiresome piece of perfection. Just the sort of girl that a man, with no shadow on his life, might be thankful to win for a wife. His thoughts hovered between the stern realities of Vivian's life, and what we may call "the sunshiny facts" of Di Witherington's. There was a thoroughness in the Vicar of St. Mary's which impressed him more than anything else. He had not halted between two opinions—he had chosen, once for all, between God and mammon. He would not move an inch from the right path for the sake of expediency. There would always be a clear perception of right

and wrong in his moral vision, and the strength to do the right, no matter what the consequences might be, in his brave heart. He would never, for the sake of good comradeship, have allowed himself to be led into temptation by such a man as Moseley. He would have parted from him with prompt decision as soon as he found out his real character, and saved himself from the possibility of such a tragedy as that by the "Miner's Rest" on the Rockies. Would he have any pity for such weakness as Jack Montague's during that detestable time? Montague himself thought not; for a sudden declension into vice would be so alien to the purity of his nature, that there could be no sympathy for the fool who fell. What would he say of the man who hid an ugly secret in the depths of his heart, and allowed it to keep him from entering the doors of a church, because he dared not carry it with him to the foot of the Altar? Montague wondered if he ever would have the courage to tell him the truth. He could fancy the grave rebuke in

his eyes, the sudden silence which would fall between them. The humiliation would be crushing ; but he could string himself up to endure it—hard, painful, almost unbearable as it would be—if only there could be peace to his conscience, and a stained page wiped out from his memory.

“ Mr. Montague—do stop a moment ! ”

Why did that sweet, fresh, young voice ring in his ears so persistently ? She would have called just as eagerly to the postman, or the butcher's boy, if he had happened to be passing. And it was as certain as death itself that she never would look up in his face again with frank confidence, if she knew what was hidden in the dreariest, darkest corner of his mind. He gave an impatient sigh as he got off his horse and surrendered it to the groom, who ran out, accompanied by *Twig-'em*, at the sound of his master's whistle. He had reached home, but his thoughts were still in a tangle ; so, not feeling ready for any society but his own, he sneaked into the house the back way ; and instead of

going into the drawing-room as usual, betook himself to the library for a quiet smoke. He felt as if he had behaved very badly to his guests, but he was sure that Charlie Kingston was not the sort of fellow to stop in the house all day to wait for him ; and his mother could be trusted to look after Ida. Afterwards he would make himself as agreeable as he could ; but, manlike, he must positively have a half-hour to himself, because it would bore him unutterably to be with any one else. A man, however conscientious in other points, will never allow himself to be bored if he can possibly help it, even by the meanest evasion. Jack felt mean as he went softly as a burglar across the marble hall, but his intentions never wavered for an instant. He would draw his favourite chair to the fire, fill his pipe, and enjoy himself in peace. After that he would join the two ladies in the drawing-room, and apologise profusely for having been kept so much longer than he intended. The door was shut, which rather surprised him, and as he

opened it gently, so as not to attract attention, he saw Miss Kingston seated in that favourite chair with a small tea-table by her side, and a novel in which she was much interested in her hand. He stood quite still in his dismay, for she looked as if she were established there for life.

"Here you are!" she exclaimed in glad surprise—stating a fact which he would have liked instantly to convert into a fiction. "Mrs. Montague has gone to see the Rector's wife. Charlie is potting rabbits, or doing something equally inoffensive; and I promised to stay at home, and give you your tea."

"Thanks. I've just lunched," was the ungracious reply wrung from his disappointed breast, as his fingers still grasped the handle of the door as if loth to leave it.

"Do shut the door, and sit down. I don't suppose that you are off again," as if that were an enormity she could not contemplate.

And he had not the courage to say that he wanted to be.

CHAPTER VIII.

ACROSS COUNTRY.

“ONLY a little dance, just for Phil’s sake, but you will come, won’t you, Mr. Montague?” The speaker was Di Witherington, who was looking her very best in Jack’s eyes, seated with a firm yet easy grace on a fiery little chestnut, at the first meet of the fox-hounds that season at The Priory. She gave the invitation as if she were asking, not conferring a favour.

“If you only give me the chance,” he said readily, as he stroked Merrylegs’ smooth neck. “Thursday — a little before midnight, I suppose?”

“Half-past eight sharp, unless you wish to come in for the last dance only.”

“You wouldn’t give me the first, would you?”—with an eagerness that surprised himself.

“Why not?” she said simply—“If you were there in time.”

“Then that is settled,” with a smile of satisfaction, though there was nothing in her quiet matter-of-fact assent to flatter him particularly.

“You haven’t asked Montague for a lead, Miss Witherington, have you?” Charlie Kingston inquired, as he rode up, looking very spruce in black coat and white cords, with violets in his button-hole.

“No, Mr. Kingston, nor any one else,” drawing up her lithe figure with an air of pretended offence. “Father used to give me a lead when I came out for a run on my pony; but I take my own line now, thank you.”

“A thousand pardons, I’m sure—I thought you might be like my sister, who follows the hounds in regular slap-dash style across

country in theory, but clings most lovingly to the road in practice."

"I know my brother is taking away my character," said Miss Kingston, edging as near as she could with the black mare that had come from The Priory stables. She was correctly got up in a faultless habit from Busvine's, but she possessed nerves when on horse-back, although she ignored them on every other occasion, and a close observer would have seen that she was far from being at her ease. "He always says that I put too high a value on my own neck; but I tell him that I want to live to hunt another day."

"Oh, men always grumble," asserted Di, out of her large experience, looking round at the same time to see if Flo had arrived on the Rectory pony. "If you take a fence pluckily, they say you want to kill yourself, if you shirk it, you are a coward. Oh, there she is by her mother. Isn't Mrs. Kindersley a dear old thing? I must go and speak to her."

"You had better not; indeed, you had

better stay where you are," remonstrated Kingston, who was always on the alert to see if the hounds were moving.

His words had no effect; for the Rector's wife was so rarely able to appear at any public gathering, that when she came in her bath-chair she was accustomed to receive a little ovation, and Di would not have neglected her on any account. Mrs. Kindersley was a great invalid, and a look of suffering was stamped upon a face, which yet bore an angelic look of peace and resignation. She had the same dark pathetic eyes as her child's; but her face was not a sad one, and her smile was cheerful, as well as sweet. All the squires of the neighbourhood, both young and old, gathered round her chair; and even the farmers came up, and touched their hats, "hoping that she had her health," or saying heartily that they were glad to see her out again.

It was a typical hunting morning—the air full of freshness like the spring, if it weren't for the mist rising from the woodland, which

was heavily charged with the scent of dying bracken and decaying leaves. Hunting was to Jack the supreme enjoyment of life. It fitted in admirably with his strong nature, and he threw his whole soul into the business. His very "get up" was that of a workman, scrupulously neat, but without the least suspicion of dandyism. There was no need to make up for effect. He looked what he was—a thorough-bred English gentleman, perfectly mounted, and, moreover, ready and able to ride his mount with the cool judgment and daring bravery characteristic of the nation to which he belonged. On his return from abroad, his hunters were his sole extravagance, though he only allowed himself two; but those were "the pick of the basket," and when his mother wanted to know their cost, he laughed, and told her that if she asked no questions he would tell her no lies. The horse he rode this morning was one after his own heart, a thorough-bred hunter, almost seventeen hands high, up to any weight, yet

able not only to gallop, but to look like galloping—a horse full of fire, but free from vice, that demanded the temper of an angel, the hands of a woman, and the will of a man, in its rider. Jack had wisely separated himself from the crowd as soon as they started from The Priory, and now stood apart from the rest on the edge of a ploughed field, supremely happy, and perfectly content, every subtle movement of the horse beneath him giving him a thrill of pleasure; even the ting, ting of the bit, the rattle of the loose curb, were music to his ears. The ting of the bit ceased, up went Prospero's head, as with ears thrown forward, he listened, motionless as a rock. Then suddenly an impatient hoof struck the ground, and he gave a reach out with his head that nearly pulled Jack from the saddle; the next instant he was dancing about after the fashion of a young colt, half-frightened at what he had done, but reassured by his master as he passed a loving hand over his glossy skin. The mist still hung about the valley—far, far away in

the woods, but muffled by the atmosphere, the sound of the horn, followed by the huntsman's cheer, as he threw his hounds into cover, came floating down the wind. "The young 'un" had heard it for the first time. He stood as if sculptured in the attitude of "attention," with ears once again thrown forward, as he listened with all his soul. Jack could feel the throb of his strong heart shaking his whole frame. A silence, broken by a low whining, as Prospero, unable to restrain himself any longer, lifted himself slightly on his hind legs, then dropped, and sent up his heels pretty straight, through sheer pleasure and excitement, but no temper. Jack was quite prepared; the curb was tightened ever so slightly; his cheeks flushed, his lips smiled, as his hand slid softly down the arched neck and over the round shoulder, for he knew the temper he had to deal with: easy to lead, but impossible to force. His own heart was beating fast, in electric sympathy with the one beneath him; but he knew that there was not a trace of fear in

either, for horse and rider were one, they both felt it, and respected each other.

“No fence too high, no ditch too wide :
I'll trust my life to these limbs so strong,
And the sweep of this glorious stride.”

Quiet again — hark ! a low whimper—a challenge from some hound in the dell, the mist wrapped man and horse in a fairy-like haze. Hark again, a crash of music, such as only a pack of fox-hounds can produce, broke the stillness—one wild cheer, and the good huntsman crammed his horn into the socket, and went blundering through the wood to get outside.

Prospero stood as if petrified, his huge lungs working heavily, his glossy neck moist under Jack's hand. No play now, and he knew it, as his master said soothingly, “You shall go soon, my beauty.” A hare sprang out of the wood with terrified face, and scoured off. Listen, a low whimpering noise, and the crackling of withered leaves and dry sticks. Here they come, the beauties ! a steam rising from their bodies.

"He must have come close," muttered Jack, "and been headed back—bother it!"

They tumbled over one another, eager, but almost mute—yet there was such a burning scent, that not a hound broke, or made a mistake. Now they are gone, buried in the wood—the echoes wake again—then silence.

Jack drew his horse nearer to the hedge. "He'll try his first point," he said to himself. "He has doubled, and they've overrun him. Any way, it's too hot—he'll break somewhere." Standing up in his stirrups, he looked round, and listened. The mist rolled away, the sun shone yellow overhead, when suddenly, without any warning, the fox stood out in the open about twenty yards on the right, his sharp face turned towards the wood, his brush curled round him on the brown earth, half crouching, with one pad lifted, ready for anything. Prospero gave an uneasy movement of his head, and in an instant the wary animal caught sight of them, and glided off like a noiseless phantom. Silently, though bubbling over with

excitement, Jack crushed the good horse with his knees, set his teeth, and slowly gathered up the loose reins—when crash, crash, crash, through the dead fern came the twenty couple of fine hounds. One moment of doubt—the next, they sprang over the dry ditch. Then Jack's pent up feelings were loosed, and a piercing shout, carried from hill to hill, told all "that he had gone."

When the view-holloa was echoing through the woods, Prospero, unable to restrain himself any longer, took the bit between his teeth, gave one wild spring, and fairly bolted after the hounds. For a few moments, Jack was at his horse's mercy, as, pulling like a mad thing, with head down, he swept over the field. Cool and collected, he tightened the reins, till the horse raised his head and began to obey the guiding touch; and when the majority of the field turned the corner of the wood, it was to see Montague far ahead, sitting well down, with his horse perfectly in hand, and going grandly.

"What a start! It's worth ten years of life,"

muttered Jack, as he gathered the “ young ’un ” together for the first fence, a small one, which he jumped as if it were a house, and shook his lean head as he dropped on the other side, as a sort of request to be allowed to gallop faster and faster. Jack, by now, had time to look round him. On the right was the huntsman, riding with single rein, a perfect horseman, on an old hunter ; easy to see that whatever may happen he will be with his hounds. Next to him was the son of the Master, on a grand black hunter, just down from Oxford for The Priory meet, brave as a lion, but a poor rider ; whilst to the left, Di Witherington was sailing away on her fiery little chestnut, with a determination that was quite bewitching ; and behind came the ruck, formed of riders, bad, good, and indifferent, whom Jack neither thought nor cared about. So on from field to field ; fences loomed big in the mist, and died away into nothing behind, all sound from the heavy brigade in the rear ceased entirely ; only five riders were now

close together, the Oxford man a little in front, whilst Jack drew nearer and nearer to Di, as each field increased the likelihood of a cropper. The pace was killing—his horse, though still going strong, began to breathe with great sobs, when there was a sudden most welcome check. Only a moment to jump off, loosen the girths, and speak a word to Di, when old “Butterfly” hit it off, and away they went once more, slowly at first on the clay, but faster and faster as they left the uplands and turned towards the valley, still five almost abreast, riding silently with set faces. Where is he going? Down into the valley—over the swollen brook. There it is, gleaming white and dangerous in front of them. Jack remembered it of old. They have been flying for forty minutes, but for the last ten or so, the pace has been slow enough to allow his own horse to recover. He turned and looked at Di’s mare. Though game to the last, she was obviously unfit for such a jump. Their eyes met, his glowing with admiration, Di’s

full of confidence and trust, as if she would willingly follow him over everything. But it would be utter madness.

“You must not attempt it,” he shouted, with a look that enforced his words. “Try lower down for a ford.”

She turned away reluctantly, but with every intention of catching him up as soon as possible.

The black horse was first, and the Oxonian had no idea of stopping ; but in his haste he caught at the reins and spoilt the stride, and though the horse did his best, there was a rush, a scramble, and then nothing but four shining up-turned plates, showing where the poor fellow had gone under his mount in deep water. Jack pulled his horse together, with a slight jerk of the bit, and one touch of the spur, quicker and quicker, with his noble head well carried, his strong limbs gathered under him, straight as an arrow, he charged the brook. It was not jumping, but flying ; as Jack, sitting right back, looked down, he saw the black horse still struggling in the water, whilst

the dripping red coat on the bank assured him of the safety of his rider.

Safe on the other side, Jack went sweeping away, an indescribable joy surging up into heart and brain, in which the pleasure of being alone with hounds was strangely mixed up with Di's trustful glance.

"There he is ! Tally-ho !" poor fox, as bold a one as ever faced a country, now in the midst of a mass of worrying dogs, whilst Jack left his horse to his own sweet fancy—which was to stand still and shake—and tried hard to flog them off. His efforts would have been but futile, had not the huntsman forded the stream, and come riding up in a hurry to take these matters out of Montague's hands, and perform the last honours to poor Reynard.

"Well, sir, if ever a man deserved a brush it's you, this day," he said as he handed Jack the trophy. "You've got a grand 'un there, and you rode 'im like—like a gentleman."

At the same moment Di rode up, as fast as poor, pumped out Merrylegs could bring her.

Leading his horse, Jack went forward to meet her.

"Oh, Mr. Montague!" she began breathlessly. "What a splendid run, and what a perfect horse you have."

"Yes; and he's a most gallant gentleman," he added with a laugh, "for he has just been saying to me, what a brave little lady Miss Merrylegs is, and he wonders if she would accept the brush from the hands, or rather the hoofs, of a comparative stranger?" at the same time fixing it into the head-stall of the little chestnut.

"It is so good of you," she said, as her face flushed with pleasure. "I have never been in such a run before; and all the brushes I have were appended to members of the vulpine race, more conspicuous for their love of home and ease than for their capabilities in the open."

"You have thoroughly deserved it," he said warmly, "for I never saw a lady ride so pluckily, or with so much judgment."

The Colonel's horse had fallen dead lame

early in the day, so Jack had the privilege of escorting his daughter to her home. Though the conversation turned naturally on the day's sport, that forty minutes of mingled danger and excitement had drawn those two nearer to each other than a whole season of balls and dinner-parties.

As Jack was smoking his pipe that night in his own sanctum, and his thoughts went over every detail of the big run, the one object that stood out more clearly than any other was Di Witherington's lovely face, as her eyes met his just before the brook had to be negotiated.

"By George, she is a noble girl!" he said to himself with enthusiasm. "Able to care for those poor devils at Dainton, and to ride like a queen through such a good thing as this! What a wife she will make for some lucky fellow!"

CHAPTER IX.

“WHEN YOUR TURN COMES.”

THERE was a great change in Phil Witherington when he came back for that dance on his birthday. He had been thrown amongst men and grown up boys, instead of girls, and he had naturally become more of a man, and considering the tendency of budding manhood, more of a dandy. Jack congratulated him warmly on having passed so creditably, and his hearty approval brought a happy smile to his sister's face. Needless to say, that she was as proud of her brother as if he had got a First in Finals; but at the same time, that she was wishing him all possible and impossible success, she watched him critically to see if there were any sign of his health failing through hard

work. He was popular at the University, as he had always been at Eton. The men on his staircase soon found out that he was ready to lend anything, from a tea-kettle to a five-pound note, and took advantage of it; of the tea-kettle after the first week or so, and of the cash later on, when acquaintance had ripened into something deeper, and the privileges of friendship had begun. He was too good for many of them, for, having come fresh from Mr. Kindersley's teaching, he could not shirk either lecture or chapel with a clear conscience; but there was nothing of the prig or the Pharisee about him, so they put up with his excellences for the present—knowing that the chances were a hundred to one that they would wear off. There is nothing so transient as the conscientiousness of a freshman, and the undergraduate of two or three years' standing looks back upon it with mingled feelings of surprise, amusement, and perhaps regret. Flora, little coquette as she was, felt uncertain as to the mode of treatment she should adopt towards

her once devoted swain. Would he come back just the same—with the same wishes and hopes—the same frank way of expressing them? Would he have come across any one he liked much better—a girl who had seen more of life than one who was cooped up in a country-village—or would he look upon “spooniness” as a boyish folly, unworthy of a real manly man?

Her mother was not quite so well that Thursday night, and the girl could scarcely make up her mind to leave her. She had a loving, most tender heart, and even now in the most thoughtless time of girlhood, home ties were stronger than any others. Mrs. Kindersley was the last person in the world to stand in the way of her child's pleasure, and she sent her off at last, telling her that nothing would be such a rest to her mind as the assurance that she was enjoying herself.

Philip Witherington was standing in the window, his fair head and delicate profile thrown out in high relief against the dusky

folds of the curtain. Miss Kingston was his companion, and he was listening to her flow of words with evident interest and attention. She was not to be compared with Flora Kindersley as to personal beauty ; but she had an air of fashion, the finished manner of a woman of the world, a well-developed figure with an exaggeratedly small waist, a gown that fitted as if moulded on her skin, a tongue that touched lightly and amusingly on all the latest topics of the day. In fact, she was just the style to attract a very young man, and to weary an older one ; and as Phil belonged to the former category, and not to the last, a pang shot through Flora's poor little heart, when she saw that there was no impulsive rush across the room as soon as she appeared, but that he actually waited till there was a convenient pause in the conversation, before showing that he was aware of her existence.

With the impulsiveness that was natural to her, she immediately decided that he was changed, and meant her to see that he was so.

Quivering with pride and pain, she schooled herself to seem outwardly cold and indifferent, whilst her heart was throbbing as if it would break through her bodice.

"Here you are at last," he said in his young, fresh voice. "I thought you were playing us a nasty trick, and I felt inclined to dash over to the Rectory to fetch you."

"Am I late?" she asked carelessly; "I can't flatter myself that you missed me. Oh, how d'ye do, Mr. Kingston?" withdrawing her hand quickly from Witherington's, in order to give it with *empressement* to Charlie. "Did you have a good run to-day? I heard that the pace was breathless."

"Yes, but why weren't you there? I nearly came such a cropper, all through looking over my shoulder. That game little pony of yours ought to have been in it."

Phil turned away, feeling that he had not come home to hear Flo talk sport with some one else. He returned rather disconsolately to Miss Kingston, and asked her to dance that

waltz. He was obliged, out of common politeness, to brighten up and not look as if he had taken her as a *pis-aller*, so that Flo, watching him surreptitiously out of the corners of her eyes, decided that he was enjoying himself tremendously with his new friend, and that she herself would be much happier sitting by her mother's side, away from all this music and noise.

Charlie Kingston was ready to flirt with anything in the shape of girl or woman, and he found this little Rectory girl an amusing study. She was looking very pretty and picturesque in a dark red frock, which suited her style and colouring far better than an ordinary white muslin. Her neck looked dazzlingly white against the rich tones of the velvet, which lined her high Medici collar, and her small pale face was lighted up by her dark eyes, now brilliant with excitement.

Phil felt as if he were left out in the cold, as Kingston took possession of Flo, and danced with her time after time ; but he did not make

himself miserable about it as he would have done some months ago, for life just then seemed so full of other interests, that love was no longer supreme. Of course he could not imagine what a girl could see in a fellow like that, judging Kingston with the striking partiality that always characterises a jealous boy, but he was able to devote himself very cheerfully to Ida, or to any one else, who happened to strike his fancy during the evening.

To Flo it seemed as if every one were especially happy except herself, as she looked from one face to another. Even Jack Montague, who was capable of looking most imperturbably solemn on the most festive occasions, seemed to-night as if he had cast away his load of care, and thrown himself completely into the spirit of the evening. He was very often by the side of Di Witherington, but there was no consciousness on her animated face. Whether they talked or danced, it was only like a pair of good friends who were very glad to be together, and that gladness was patent

to every observant eye. They were sitting in the hall, amongst a temporary grove of chrysanthemums, when Colonel Witherington came up, and asked if Montague knew that Bernard Fraser was dead. Jack looked up in grave surprise. "Not dead—you don't mean that?"

The unlucky man was known by name to both of them, but they had little or no personal acquaintance with him. His antecedents, as well as the sudden rupture of his engagement to a Miss Hunter, had been freely discussed and animadverted on by the whole county, and some had foreseen a tragic conclusion, for which they had been laughed at by others.

"He shot himself through the head, in his own bedroom at five this morning. His servant heard the shot and rushed in, but it was too late. A horrid business from beginning to end; but I think the girl's well out of it," and the Colonel moved on to discuss the matter with some one else.

"I don't," exclaimed Di indignantly, as she

looked up, with pale cheeks and flashing eyes. "She is a nasty unforgiving thing, and if I were Ada Hunter I should never have another moment's peace!"

"I am not quite clear about the story," said Jack quietly. "Why did she give him up?"

"Mr. Fraser had done something shady. I don't know what; but he was too honourable to marry her without telling her." Jack leant forward with increasing interest. "There was no chance of his being found out, it was not that; and he told her all, without keeping anything back, hoping, trusting that she would forgive him. And her answer was, to turn her back upon him and tell him to leave the house and never come near her again!" her soft voice quivering with passionate indignation.

"What would you have done?" asked Montague in a low voice, as if his interest were centred in Di's answer to his question, instead of in Miss Hunter's action.

"I would have forgiven him, whatever it was," she exclaimed, looking up with kindling

eyes. "He had confessed—he was sorry. He was certain sure not to do it again. I should have loved him all the better for having fallen, and got up again. Think of the misery of it! Oh, it was cruel—fiendishly cruel!"

She had broken her fan in her passionate grasp, but she did not care. She was thinking of the unfortunate Fraser, driven to death by a woman's pride. Jack took it from her, and bent his head over it, as if examining the broken stems; in reality it was to hide his own emotion, for he felt at the moment that he could command neither voice nor expression. "He had confessed—he was sorry; I should have loved him all the better for having fallen." How the words seemed to ring in his ears, and mix confusedly with the soft, pleading notes of "Adoration."

"Wouldn't it depend upon what it was?" he said gruffly, after a pause, during which his heart beat like a girl's.

"Whatever it was," she said firmly in her wild and thoughtless generosity, "haven't

we all done horrid things—or wanted to do them, which is just as bad? I never stole a loaf, but who could say I wouldn't, if I were starving, and had the chance?"

"I would answer for you, if you couldn't answer for yourself."

"Would you?" with a glad smile. "I know you always think better of me than I deserve, and I won't be hard on *you* when your turn comes. Let us go back to the drawing-room."

Di little knew the significance of her own words, for at the moment she spoke at random without thinking much of what she was saying; but to Jack, with his constant consciousness of a guilty secret, her careless words seemed to contain a glorious promise of forgiveness for the future, if he ever unsealed his own lips.

CHAPTER X.

RECKLESS OF CONSEQUENCES.

A STRANGE sort of happiness seemed to possess Jack Montague for several weeks. The gloom departed from his expression, there was a heartier ring in his laugh, and he walked about the house with a lighter, brisker step. Mrs. Montague noticed the change, and wondered whether it was destined to last. Being a person of quick perceptions, she was quite aware that the alteration had something to do with *The Wilderness*, but she felt a little uneasy lest the castle her son was evidently engaged in building, should tumble down before completion and send him back into a still deeper slough of despond, injured, if not crippled for life. He was not the sort of man

to get over a disappointment easily. It would leave a scar that he would always remember ; and it would probably send him out into the world as a second Ishmael, for Derwent's Cray would be impossible as a place of residence so long as Di was there, to remind him continually of what he would probably want as much as ever.

The two were thrown together a good deal in the hunting-field, for Miss Witherington was generally to be seen on Merrylegs or Jackanapes, at any meet that came within a practicable distance. They had many long talks by the cover-side, many quiet rides home through the dusky lanes, whilst the Colonel jogged along on his favourite old "Peter," with some crony, whose road lay in the same direction as theirs ; many pleasant evenings at The Wilderness, where Jack had an opportunity of studying her in her home life, and felt as if he were almost considered as one of the family. Mrs. Witherington showed her best side on these occasions, for she had taken a fancy to Mon-

tague, and looked upon him as a safe friend both for her son and daughter. Unlike the society-mother of the London world, she was desperately anxious to keep her daughter from being snapped up by any eager suitor. She by no means intended her to be an old maid ; but she wished to enjoy her, and have some pleasure out of her beauty and brightness for a few years, at least, before she exchanged her old home for one of her own. She consequently cast a suspicious eye on all the eligible men of the neighbourhood, with one notable exception. Jack, for some inscrutable reason of her own, she considered to be, in sporting phrase, “out of the running.” A visit from him, or a meeting with him, had become such an every-day occurrence, that she foolishly fancied that her daughter could not possibly invest them with any interest ; but must infallibly have grown to consider such a near neighbour and constant visitor in the light of a sort of make-believe elder brother. Acting on this mistaken idea, she gave him a cordial welcome whenever

he came in, and Jack began to wonder why all the neighbourhood seemed to complain of Mrs. Witherington's being so uncertain, and disagreeable. He considered her to be outrageously maligned, and his mistaken idea gave to his manner when he talked to her a special gentleness, which strengthened her growing liking for him and yet did not open her eyes to his dangerous qualities. The Colonel knew that Montague was an excellent judge of horse-flesh, and always consulted him on making any addition to his stable. He also fancied that he could depend upon him to take a broad-minded view of parish matters, using the word in its original sense, and not as a synonym for pure secularity of thought, so that he often came to consult him when a new scheme was started. Like his wife, he rejoiced in the friendship between Montague and his son, and thought it a great advantage for a young fellow to have such a man for his chief counsellor. It was the first time, within the memory of Di, that she and her mother had agreed in a liking

for the same individual ; and she was thankful that he could come into the room without bringing a cloud upon her parent's face, or provoking a fretful remark. Often and often she had sat on thorns when a visitor was announced, not knowing how he or she would be received, for Mrs. Witherington had an absolute frankness about her likes or dislikes on such occasions, which was disconcerting and embarrassing to Di, who possessed a very proper sense of the duty of showing courtesy to a guest. This was all the more aggravating, because there were plenty of times in her life when, either as wife or mother, she had shown herself capable of great secretiveness. Di had often looked at her with a questioning gaze in her large eyes, feeling sure that she was keeping something back. She never felt as if there were complete confidence between them ; and it was this, perhaps, which accounted for the love approaching idolatry which she lavished on her brother. Her warm affections required some outlet, and when intentionally

repulsed by her mother, and thrown back upon herself most unintentionally by her father's constitutional reserve, her stream of love and tenderness flowed out upon Phil in all its abundance. It was probably on account of his absence, that she was so ready to give her friendship to Jack Montague. She must have somebody to turn to, either for advice or sympathy, in the manifold small difficulties which arose in her active life. Flora Kindersley was always ready to give her plenty of the latter, but Di had a very small particle of trust in her discretion, and needed a more reliable adviser. So it came to pass that when an affair proved troublesome, her first thought always was, "I will ask Mr. Montague;" and often at a meet she would come up to him with an eager look on her pretty face, and he knew at a glance, and with a pleasant thrill of pleasure, that some knotty question had been reserved for his decision. There were plenty of people who noticed that Merrylegs and Prospero had a knack of getting side by side,

even in a lane crowded with horses urged on by their eager riders; and, of course, they drew their own conclusions. But if a purpose were gradually dawning in Montague's mind, a purpose which seemed like a blaze of sunshine breaking into the black darkness of a subterranean passage, Di was perfectly innocent of it. It was glorious weather in November, and the vivid tints on the foliage made every bank of trees, except the dark unchangeable pines, look like a wreath of glory thrown into Nature's lap. The sun was as brilliant as it ought to have been in July, and it was possible to ride across a ploughed field without getting bespattered from the hem of a habit to the crown of a hat.

There were no pouring wet days to give Mrs. Witherington an excuse for keeping her daughter at home; no scarcity of foxes, to baulk them of a run, and send them back with blank disappointment on their faces. Di enjoyed herself with the unreasoning enjoyment of a child; but Montague realised almost with

dismay, that he scanned the weather now with the same acute eagerness that he had given to it as a boy, when first promoted from a pony to a horse, and allowed to follow as he chose across hedge, ditch, or gate. The days hurried by, and he found in their hurry an excuse for not stopping to think. He felt as if he were in the middle of a run, in a country which he knew to be riddled with dangerous pit-falls, and yet forced on because the hounds were visible on ahead, and he would be out of it all if he pulled up for one moment. He knew that there would come a time when he would have to stop—but not yet when the hounds were in full cry, and his good horse was carrying him so bravely, and he felt as if a new life were bounding and leaping through his veins. Come what might in the dead season, now was the hour for enjoyment, and he threw himself into it, as if he had not a single scrap of a scruple to keep him back. It was a madness for which he was certain to pay, and pay

heavily. He knew it, but with the recklessness of an empty-headed school-boy, instead of the steady caution of a man of experience, he persistently ignored it. It was the same spirit of recklessness that had come over him, and taken possession of him in America. At times like these, he was utterly blind to consequences, although he had talked about them so sagely on one occasion to Di Witherington. Even if he saw the wall in front of him, he would go on like a madman, who forgets perhaps that his head is softer than brick and mortar. Jack did *not* forget, so had not this excuse, but none the less he went on; and there was not a soul to warn him—not a voice to bid him halt if he valued peace or honour.

It was an off-day, when there was no meet within a reasonable distance, so Miss Witherington had time to think of the sorrows of others between the pauses of her pleasures. She went to see Mrs. Crutchley, who had not succumbed to her peculiar malady. Mrs.

Winter's kind nursing, as much as Dr. Prescott's cleverness, had helped to pull her through; and she was sitting in her chair, supported by a couple of clean pillows propped up against a freshly-mended towel-horse, with a cup of tea and a plate of bread and butter on a table by her side, and looking almost cheerful.

"So Nat Winter has come back," said Di cheerfully, after the usual amount of inquiry had been made after Mrs. Crutchley's health. "I hope Polly is quite satisfied now."

"She beant sich a fool," was the gruff answer. "Winter's a bad bargain at best, and Winter without work means another empty mouth to feed."

"But why without work? You mean to say that he won't go back to Mr. Strangways?" Di exclaimed in real vexation, for she thought his foolish, false shame would bring both him and his wife to the verge of starvation, as it would scarcely be possible to support two people, and one of them a man, on the produce of button-holes.

“ You’ve put the shoe on th’ wrong foot. It’s that ere Strangways won’t have nuthen to do with a gaol-bird. Them were his own words, and I wish they’d stuck in his throat, as the herring-bone did in mine. It’s an odd, contrairy world,” she added, meditatively. “ I chokes over my hairmless wittles, and he gets out a mouth fu’ o’ blasphemious words, as if they was as soft as cream.”

“ But those wicked words hurt in another sort of way,” said Di quickly. “ When your fish-bone is forgotten, they will rankle just as much as ever. It is too bad of Mr. Strangways, and I should like to tell him so to his face.”

“ Ay, Missie, just tell him wot ye thinks of him. An’ doan’t ye be too self-denyin’ either,” with a sudden gleam of malice in her half-closed eyes, as she thought of her son’s deteriorated life through the wearing depression of hard work for niggardly wage. “ I’d giv’ him it generouslike whenever I’d got the chance. Full measure, as the Scriptor puts it; and yon’s a text which has the powerfulest meaning to sich as

have never seen nor heard tell o' sich a gran' thing, in all their born lives."

"They don't give it you at Granby's, certainly," said Di, her young heart full of wrath, as she thought of the grocer at whose shop all Strangways' people were obliged to buy their groceries at a shamefully extortionate price. The system of "fogging" was in full swing in this corner of Dainton, and the shop was known to belong to Harding, the foreman at the works, who evaded the law by putting in Granby as nominal proprietor.

"No, but this is wot I 'opes an' prays," joining her helpless hands together, and looking quite devout. "I am but a sinner, an' this is the 'eartiest prayer I ever spakes, that when the Lord pleases to take this 'ere Granby, He may putt him in a warm corner where he always 'as to 'elp 'imself with false weights, as he did down 'ere to us poor sufferin' folk."

"Oh, but we should pray for our enemies."

"That's jist wot I'm a sayin'," triumphantly.

“I made that prayer surreptitious-like, but Mike, he do say it beats the parson’s, for he could say it night and morning, without a stretch of his memory.”

“He had better forget it,” said Di, feeling the necessity for an admonition. “You should ask that a true sense of honesty should be put into Mr. Granby’s mind.”

“Asking yer pardon, Miss, I’m not one for wasting my breath,” with an air of supreme contempt. “If Granby’s got a soul, let ’im look arter it, as he does arter our little bits o’ money. He would get to Heaven by ’lectric telegram, I’m thinkin’, if so be he tried it arter that ’ere fashion.”

It seemed useless to argue with her, and it was already growing late, so Di left the old woman the happy possessor of a pudding, which softened her heart infinitely more than a lecture, and hurried away to the Winters.

Nat, a tall good-looking fellow, with an expression of hard defiance on his dark face,

slunk out of the room by one door as Miss Witherington appeared at the other. At the first words of sympathy, Mary broke down, and her tears came so fast and so blindingly that she had to put aside the work, at which she had been stitching, with small interruptions, ever since the daylight had grown bright enough for her to see to thread her needle. To cry was shocking waste of time; but she had borne up bravely during the long weary day, and patience and courage were at their last ebb.

“The neighbours ain’t took it ’alf so bad, as Nat an’ me were afeared they would. They seemed more glad to see ’im than contemptious-like, and parson went to fetch ’im from th’ station, his own kind self,” with a long drawn sob.

“That was just like Mr. Vivian,” exclaimed Di, with warm appreciation.

“It put some ’eart into the poor fellow at the first start, but when he screwed hissself up to go to Harding, and ask to be took on again,

and they told him he wasn't wanted no more, 'count of wot he'd done, it was the crooellest slap in th' face, and it real knocked him over, it did."

"Never mind, don't lose hope, Polly," in the softest voice, as she laid her hand on the poor girl's shoulder. "I will find your husband some work, and then he need not care a bit about that horrid man, Harding. Dry your eyes, there's a good girl. You should have let me know before."

"I was 'shamed to be allus troubling of you, Miss," trying hard to recover her composure. "Wot would ha' become of us now, but for the money you gave me for goin' to Mrs. Crutchley?"

"That was nothing to do with me, as I told you, and now I must really be going. Tell Nat that it was very uncivil to walk out of the room as I walked in. Good-bye. I hope to bring you good news, the next time I come," she added rashly, as if work for the unemployed was to be found round the next corner.

Her father had a prejudice against poachers, which she knew it would be impossible to overcome; but with Mr. Montague it was very different, for she had found of late that if she ran against one of *his* prejudices it fell down like an insecure hurdle. And yet no one could call him a weak man, only he was always so especially kind to her—possibly because she was Phil's sister, she reflected with a smile and without a blush.

CHAPTER XI.

“ YOU KNOW SOME OF HIS PEOPLE.”

IF Jack Montague was to be arbiter of Nat Winter's destiny, the question could not be decided at once, as he had received a pressing entreaty from his sister to come up to town, for the express purpose of escorting her to Aurelia Blake's "At home" on the following Thursday. Lady Wildgrave added that she felt no scruple in asking him, an assertion which he quite believed, even without the reason given, that he had behaved so rudely to that lady in never appearing at one of her Thursdays before. A sudden severe frost had put an end to the hunting, and spoilt the tempers of hundreds of sportsmen, or else it is probable that Jack Montague, in his present

lax state of principle, would have sent Miss Blake to the bottom of the sea, or any other equally uncomfortable locality, before he tore himself away from Derwent's Cray. Miss Witherington was caught in a snowstorm during her drive home from Dainton, and arrived at The Wilderness looking like a white mummy, just as her alarmed mother was sending off two gardeners and a footman to look for her. Since that day she had been confined to her bed with a severe chill, during which time Mrs. Witherington enjoyed herself immensely, for she kept appearing at odd intervals during the night, as well as the day, with some nasty nauseous stuff, or else an oft-repeated lecture on imprudence, which Di found equally insupportable. She did not dare to lock her door, and she could not ask her mother to walk out, so she was thoroughly taken at a disadvantage, and lay there groaning in spirit, but gradually improving in health. This being the state of affairs, Montague did not feel such a martyr, after all, as the train

carried him through snow and wind to Victoria. His sister gave him a rapturous welcome, and talked so fast about her engagements, dissipations, benevolent intentions, &c. &c., that he guessed immediately that she was fencing off the questions which she was afraid of being asked. She was just as carefully dressed as ever, but no longer with a view to pleasing her husband's eye. Montague would never have found this out for himself, not having the keen penetration of a woman; but Lady Wildgrave made the admission in plain, unmistakable English. She and Jack were sitting over five o'clock tea, and feeling delightfully cosy in the warm becurtained boudoir, with a glowing fire casting a ruddy light over the silver accessories of the tea-table, when the door was opened abruptly, the *portière* drawn aside, and the master of the house came in. He shook hands with Jack, asked a few questions about Mrs. Montague, the Witheringtons, &c., and then turned to his wife with a cross look on his usually good-tempered face.

"I thought you knew that I hated that colour."

She looked down at her dark-green velvet gown, which she knew to be especially becoming, and answered provokingly, "Other people don't, if you do."

"Then you get yourself up for other people—not for me?" raising his voice, as well as his eyebrows.

"Naturally;" very coolly, as she helped herself to a cobweb of bread and butter. "I see more of them than I do of you."

He laughed uneasily; perhaps because his brother-in-law was beginning to look dangerous, as he sat in grave silence, tugging at his moustaches. "You wouldn't want a fellow to be hanging about you all day?" he asked with a half apology in his tone.

"Not at all; though I might like to see him once in the twenty-four hours," with a pretended air of indifference, though her heart was beating fast.

"Draw it mild, Em," standing on the

hearth-rug with his hands in his pockets. "You are such a girl for exaggerating. Haven't I promised to take you to the Toxophilite Gardens on Saturday?"

"Yes; but it isn't Saturday yet."

"Of course, it isn't Saturday. I can't think what you are driving at. That reminds me it's Thursday," pulling out his watch, a favourite, and not original, trick of his when beginning to feel bored. "I must be off like a shot. You are going to take her to that awful woman's to-night? You *are* a good fellow, Jack. I'd rather be hung, drawn and quartered. Ta, ta; see you again presently," waving his hand airily, he went out of the room humming a line of "I'll have your hat," and leaving rather an uncomfortable silence behind him; but not for long. Just as Jack was wondering if he ought to say anything about the evidently strained relations between the husband and wife, several visitors dropped in, one after the other, who were content to brave the severity of the weather for the sake

of a pleasant lounge in a pretty woman's boudoir.

Em was agreeably surprised to find that her brother could take part in all the fun and nonsense that went on, and without any apparent effort. He was no longer the dampest of blankets, and she thought he had quite laid aside his *rôle* of the "Modern Moraliser." She watched when Dandy dropped out the nickname of "The Lost Rabbit," which he had fastened on his cousin, from a character in a farce, who was weak and witless, and always "wanting" when most wanted. His moustaches twitched with an amused smile; there was no censorious frown on his broad forehead, and he no longer looked as if he agreed with Carlyle as to the universal folly of his fellow-creatures. It was such a relief not to be oppressed by his portentous gravity, that her volatile spirits went up like a rocket; and Jack, in his turn, was amazed to see her laughing and chatting as gaily, as if her husband were a model Benedict, and she were as free from care as a fly.

Miss Aurelia Blake's rooms in Chesterfield Gardens were crowded to a certain extent, but not so much as to exclude all possibility of comfort. It was her whim never to provide any extra amusement for her guests but their mutual conversation, so no one was able to insist on making a tedious recitation when some one had just asked a question, and was dying for an answer; no budding flirtations were nipped in their first attempt at blooming, by the enforced silence which is the tax paid by conventional politeness, when an unwilling audience is obliged to listen to a song which nine-tenths of them do not wish to hear.

The method seemed to answer, for there was a constant buzz of conversation. The guests gathered together in animated groups round a distinguished M.P. who was famed for his lively repartees in the House, or a celebrated author, who was known to be bringing out a work in which he had "slated" and satirised the most prominent figures in society, or a learned professor, who during the course of an iconoclastic

life had explained away everything but his own intellect, or an energetic member of the London School Board, who insisted upon religion being administered in homœopathic doses, as if it were a dangerous poison, whilst he favoured a large-minded generosity with other people's money, on the purchase of pianos, violins, and guitars, and other *objets de luxe*.

Lady Wildgrave was soon surrounded by a knot of men, for beauty has attraction for eyes that are tired with the almost undecipherable writing of ancient MSS., as well as for those who never have a deeper study than the columns of a betting book ; and hobbyists of all descriptions find as much relief in turning from their one engrossing thought, and chatting with a pretty woman, as a school-boy who shows his back to exercises and Latin repetitions, and starts for a game of cricket.

Jack was amused to see a grave statesman becoming gradually unfossilised under the magnetic power of his sister's blue eyes ; at the same time, he could not help angrily wondering why

her husband had been able to enfranchise himself so soon from the influence of her charms.

Aurelia Blake had welcomed him with one of her slow but most expressive smiles, as if she were particularly glad to see him. She had been too much engaged with the reception of her guests to say more than a few words to him as yet; but, now that a general flow of conversation was going on, she came up to him and asked how life was progressing down at Derwent's Cray. She was looking very impressive in terra-cotta velvet, made with classical simplicity. One row of large pearls encircled her throat, but her dark hair was piled up on the top of her well-shaped head, which needed no other ornament.

Jack, as usual, felt perversely inclined to give a frivolous answer to one of Miss Blake's grave questions, so he told her that life had come to a dead-lock, owing to "this hideous frost."

"That only means that you are obliged to

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keep your hunters in their stables," contemptuously. "By life, I did not mean sport."

"And yet sport is my idea of life in the country."

"You are curiously bent on doing yourself injustice, Mr. Montague," she said as she sat down on an ottoman, which was conveniently vacated at the moment, and motioned to him to take the place beside her. "Surely there are enough recruits for the ranks of the frivolous, without your pretending to join them."

"But what if there were no pretence?"

"But there *is* pretence," she said with a certain impatience in her tone. "You could not live the life of your own brother-in-law, for instance. You would blow out your brains before a year was out."

"Simply because I was not born a pink and white doll. I daresay I should have made a fool of myself somehow, if I had been given Wildgrave's good looks as well as his opportunities."

She studied his face with grave eyes. "Say

rather, Lord Wildgrave's insignificance, and his drawbacks of title and fortune. They have floated him on the topmost froth of life; and the poor fellow has never had a chance of sounding its depths."

"I should have said he was born under a lucky star," with a slight shrug of his broad shoulders.

"Then you would be utterly wrong. Don't you remember that one day he must die?" she asked with startling abruptness.

"It doesn't strike me that Wildgrave must die particularly. It's the one fate common to all—the buffoon as well as the pessimist."

"Yes, but it's an awful fate for some. Fancy, if the end came and blotted you out, before you had made the smallest mark on the world."

"You are hitting me rather hard," said Jack, with a short laugh; "for I'm only just waking up to the fact that I can be of any mortal use to anybody; but there's a man near us at Dainton, who would actually shame

you into doing something by the force of his own example."

"Mr. Vivian is too stern—too narrow. I don't see the use of giving up everything," she said with a curious irritation in her voice, and an unusual excitement in her manner. "It doesn't pay—it's absurd—extravagant, beyond all reason."

"I had no idea that you knew him," Montague exclaimed in surprise. "But if you do, I can't imagine how you can call him 'narrow.'"

"Narrow is too mild a word for him. He had everything that this world could give him, and he flung it away for a fanatical fancy. If ever a man spoilt his life wilfully, he did with his own hands, and with his eyes wide open." There was a vehemence in her tone and in her eyes which astonished Jack, but he could not allow her assertion to go unchallenged.

"He does not think he has spoilt his life," he said quietly.

"You can't tell me that he is happy amongst those unwashed, mindless creatures," she retorted in the confidence of complete incredulity.

"I am sure he is. His idea of happiness is to know his duty, and to do it with all his might."

"Rather too sublime for an ordinary mortal," with a scornful curl of her lip. "What madens me is the waste! A good-hearted dolt could do his work down there every bit as well, whilst Cyril Vivian's grand intellect is utterly thrown away. I call it almost wicked. It is like dressing a beggar in white satin and Brussels lace, when a homely serge would serve her better, and last much longer."

"But you cannot say a dolt would be better for Dainton?"

"He would last much longer; he would not take so much out of himself as Cyril will," relapsing into the use of his Christian name through the force of long habit. "Of course

he will go on slaving till he kills himself, and then he will feel as if he had done an excellent thing."

"At least his friends would be able to say, '*Requiescat in pace*,' with a clear conscience, over his grave," said Jack in a low voice.

"Why should he rest in peace when he has destroyed the peace of those he leaves behind?"

The question broke from her involuntarily. She did not expect an answer, but looked down at the rococo fan she held in her hand, with sudden tears welling up under her drooping lids, as the pain and mortification of the bitter past stung her sharp as an adder's fang. There was a time when her passionate heart, her uncommon beauty, her large fortune, were all within reach of Vivian's hand; but he chose a narrow path in which she thought there was but little room for two; and she was left behind in all the luxury and comfort of a smiling world, whilst he went on alone over

briars and stones, his eyes fixed on the one bright star shining through, what seemed to her, such dreary twilight.

Aurelia roused herself suddenly, and looked up with the calm imperturbability, which befitted the hostess of such a gathering. "We have wasted our time shockingly, Mr. Montague. The past is useless, because it is out of reach; the future must be left to take care of itself, as we don't know anything about it; *ergo* the present is our chief concern; and what have I done for you to-night? Nothing, only talked dissimilarities—is there such a word?—about a masher and a martyr—two men at the two extremes of a pole, which neither of us wish to reach."

"But I'm interested in both; and I never was further from being bored."

"Would it take your breath away if I told you that I was intensely interested in you?" looking straight into his eyes with a steady, unflinching stare.

"I've just breath enough to say, I can't

believe it," flushing to his own annoyance over his broad white forehead.

"You may—I never flatter. Your personality stands out from the common ruck; you are meant to dominate others; you are made to lead, and not to follow. Don't drop behind through modesty or laziness—one retrograde step leaves you such hopeless leagues in the rear," she said with earnestness, as if she had made one such step in her own life, which she had found it impossible to retrieve.

"And that is the proper place for me," said Jack gravely, though he was conscious of a latent ambition springing into full-grown life at her words.

"Excuse me," a bright smile lighting up her face. "That is the place for the mean or the guilty, and you are neither."

She did not notice the shadow which seemed to fall on his expression as he heard her confident assertion, for a tall man with a thin, hatchety face came up at the moment, in

order to take his leave. He seemed in a great hurry, so that she would not make an effort to detain him; but as soon as he was gone, she turned to Jack, and said regretfully: "That is the very man I meant to introduce you to. A delightful creature and a great traveller! Surely you know some of his people?"

"He was like somebody; but I can't think who it was," said Montague, looking puzzled. "What was his name?"

"Richard Llewellyn Mosely. You must have heard of him. Oh, Lady Wildgrave, you are not going to run away just yet?" with more than conventional concern.

"Indeed, I must, or the horses will be turned into icicles. Good-night, dear Aurelia—such a delightful evening," Em murmured sweetly, as she leant on the arm of a distinguished general, who looked as proud of his companion as he used to be of his gallant Rifles. "Come, Jack, wake up!" tapping him on the shoulder with her fan. "Are you dreaming?"

He followed her dainty figure down the stairs; but when she was safely landed in the carriage, and the General stepped aside reluctantly to make way for him, he announced his intention of walking home.

"Not in this bitter cold. You will be quite *frozen*," she exclaimed in consternation.

"That room was grilling," he said, hurriedly. "Good-night. Don't wait for me," and he walked off, as soon as he had shut the carriage door, in order to escape further remonstrance, whilst Em leant back half-buried in furs—and yawned.

But all sleepiness vanished from her eyes, when Lord Raymond, who had evidently been on the watch for the carriage, came out of No. 200, as soon as the door was opened, and ran down the steps to hand her out.

"Where's Montague? Isn't your brother with you?" he asked, with an unusual amount of briskness.

"No. He wanted a walk, or else I bored him. Oh, how fearfully cold it is!" hurrying

into the warmth and brightness of her comfortable home from the frost bound world outside. It was not till she had reached a fire, and was holding out her small hands to the welcome blaze, that she began to speculate as to the reason of his being there. "Did you want Jack, really?"

He looked down at her, so small, so helpless, as incapable as a humming-bird of buffeting against a storm, and his heart swelled with an over-mastering impulse of pity. "Poor little woman, are you so cold?" he said gently.

"Of course I am, everybody must be in this inhuman weather."

"Inhuman?" raising his eyebrows.

"Well, I don't suppose you came here to quarrel with my adjectives, answer my question. Do you want Jack?" with playful imperativeness.

"I thought we might have had a smoke together," with an elaborate air of unconcern; "but as he hasn't turned up, I think I'll slope." He gave her a little nod, and walked

towards the door ; but when he reached it, he seemed in no hurry to go out, and stood there, looking at her as she knelt before the fire, half smothered in white furs, the fire-light playing on her golden hair. "If you want me, you know where to send for me," he said slowly.

"Do I ever want you?" with a coquettish smile thrown over her shoulder.

"You might, you know," he answered, gravely, as he opened the door.

CHAPTER XII.

FOR HIS SISTER'S SAKE.

DANDY did not leave the house at once, but turned into the smoking-room, where he was sure to find a fire up to almost any hour of the night. The cold, if not "inhuman," according to Lady Wildgrave's inconsequent remark, was at least more intense than any human creature could willingly bear without any external aids to comfort, and Lord Raymond, shivering in front of a genial blaze, wondered what could possess a man to wander about amidst ice and snow, when there was a comfortable roof within reach to shelter his senseless head. He had a little doze, then woke up with a start, as a footman came in to replenish the fire. Directly the operation was

over, he made up his mind to write a note, instead of waiting an indefinite time. He was much relieved at the idea, and as soon as he had penned a few lines, picked himself up from his comfortable lounge, and departed.

He left the note in charge of James, to be given to Mr. Montague as soon as he came in, preferring that it should not be exposed to view on the hall-table, lest his cousin should be the first to return. With more than usual prudence he had ferreted out a stick of sealing-wax, and sealed it carefully; for the matter it contained might have the same effect on the domestic peace of the household as a fuse applied to a canister of dynamite. Jack, when he came in, looking frozen and fagged, tore it open carelessly, supposing it to be an invitation to dine at the Carlton, or something equally unimportant. But his expression changed quickly when he read the following lines:

“The Lost Rabbit will bolt to-morrow, if you don’t stop him. You are the only man

who can do it. He will be at Charing Cross 8.25 with Mrs. A——. DANDY.”

“Here’s a pretty piece of business!” muttered Jack, unconsciously making use of the name of an amusing farce. “And how the deuce am I to manage it? But I will,” setting his teeth. “I take my oath, I will. The brute, the skunk, the cad!” He threw the note into the fire, and watched it burn with savage eyes, almost capable of wishing in his rage that his peccant brother-in-law could change places with the scrap of paper.

Good heavens! What possessed the fellow to take to himself a wife like poor little Em? If he meant to be fickle and unfaithful, and changeable as a weathercock, why didn’t he choose some woman of the world, who would have been ready to make the compromise of callousness—“You shall go your way, if you will let me go mine?” He paced up and down the room, his rage working within him, as his eye travelled now and then to a stick with a silver knob at the top, which Wildgrave,

or one of his friends, had left and forgotten on a couch. He felt as if it would be the most utter satisfaction to his wrath if he could break it across the Viscount's back. But to hold such a little fellow in his powerful grasp would make him feel both a brute and a coward; and also to have such a scene occur in that house could scarcely be conducive to his sister's future peace or comfort. Reluctantly he had to allow that the argument of physical force, the only one in which he had any faith at the moment, must be laid aside in favour of that of moral suasion, in which he had no faith at all. The man who had no more heart or conscience than a butterfly, would laugh in his face if he attempted what he would jeeringly call "the high morality dodge," and how on earth he was to influence him he could not conceive. To lecture him would be about as useful as to preach in an empty church; and yet, something must be done to save Em's poor little golden head from shame. There was a deep well of tenderness

for his sister in Jack's heart, for the memory of their happy girl and boyhood together could never be forgotten. She had been his comrade for so many years, that his home had seemed half empty when he came back to find his mother all alone. He had grown used to her absence as other interests had crowded into his life ; but he always, as it were, kept a warm corner ready for her, which no one else would be allowed to occupy.

"Halloa ! Jack, not turned in yet !" The Viscount stood before him, a crush hat on his head, a fur-lined coat thrown over his dress-things, a half-smoked cigar between his fingers, and looking as innocent and imperturbable as any other fool who is thoroughly content with his folly.

Jack came to an abrupt stop in his peripatetics.

"No. I waited for you," he said slowly, as with an idea that the position might be useful, he placed himself between his host and the door.

"Anything up?" the latter asked carelessly, as he divested himself of his out-door garments, and threw them on to a sofa.

"Not yet."

Wildgrave gave him one quick look, then hastily lighted a candle, for he scented a storm in the air, and as his conscience was not quite as clear as a child's unused slate, he deemed it prudent to fly rather than to brave it. "Then keep it for to-morrow; there's a good fellow. I'm dead sleepy," he said, with an artificial yawn of extravagant dimensions.

"You have not much time," Jack answered, with a glance at the clock on the mantle-shelf; "but I must request you to spare me a few minutes."

"Are you off to-morrow?"

"You are, at all events."

Wildgrave was unpleasantly startled, but he took care not to show it, as he exclaimed angrily: "If I am, that's no business of yours."

"It is my sister's business, and I am her

natural guardian," very quietly, but with the ominous hoarseness of suppressed passion in his voice; "and *as* her guardian, I ask you to stop and reflect before you take a step which outrages decency and honour?"

"Confound your impudence!" his small frame literally shaking with anger. "I know as well as you, or any other fellow, how to draw the line."

"You do; but only to jump over it."

Wildgrave gave a short laugh. "Yes, and, by Jove, there are plenty of others to join in that sort of skipping-rope game. I sha'n't be a solitary instance."

"Yes, there are plenty of others—plenty of your own friends who dine at your table, and whom you introduce to your wife," Jack said, with great bitterness, "but I don't know that it is much comfort to a criminal in Newgate to hear that the gaol is crowded. His crime won't be divided into fractions amongst the other prisoners, any more than yours amongst your friends."

“Oh! I’ll be responsible for my own lot,” with a careless shrug of his shoulders, as if he thought the burden would not weigh heavily. Finding that Montague would have his say, he put down his candlestick, sat himself on the edge of a rickety table, and pulled out his cigarette-case. “And I don’t see why, in the name of goodness, you should trouble yourself to turn a hair.”

“Simply because you don’t stand alone, or I’d take my oath not to interfere—no, that I declare I wouldn’t. You should go at a hand-gallop to the devil, and I’d only take precious care to give you a wide berth,” said Jack quickly. “Good God, when I think how you must have stood by Em’s side before the altar, and sworn before Heaven and your own paltry world, to love, honour and cherish her—knowing that it was a gigantic lie, and that you meant to prove it so every day of your shameless life!”

“I say, draw it mild,” broke in the Viscount, with a sudden flush of something like

shame on his good-looking face. "I don't ill-treat her. I'm not such a brute as that."

"No, you don't give her a black eye; you fancy yourself too much of a gentleman to develope into a brutal bully. But how many black hours have you given her? How many times a day do you bruise her tenderest feelings? Those are the scars which last the longest, and do the most terrible mischief." Jack's wrath was rising like a storm-lifted wave, but he was keeping it down with all the strength of his will, whilst he lashed the other man with the scourge of his righteous scorn.

Wildgrave jumped off the table, and throwing back his head with a sort of angry snort, exclaimed indignantly: "You don't say a word about the way she treats me. I tell you that when I drop into her den, I find her nine times out of ten with a crowd of fellows round her, and she hasn't a word or a look for me. I'm not fond of a back seat, so I naturally walk out to find out somebody who appreciates me more."

“Don’t you see that it is a mere pretence? She is devoted to you all the while.”

“A queer sort of devotion!” scornfully.

“If it is, it’s your own work,” said Montague, hotly. “I’d stake my head that she was the purest-hearted child, when you first took her in hand. And if she lays herself open now to the charge of foolish flirtation—nothing more, mind you,” he added impressively—“it is because she would be left to go about alone, or to sit in loneliness at home, if she depended on her husband.”

“What utter rot! As if I were obliged to follow her about like a pug-dog!” taking up the poker, and smashing a coal with such energy that he scattered bits here and there on the Turkish rug. “But I tell you what; I won’t stand this sort of thing any longer. If you don’t approve of me and my ways, the sooner you leave my house the better.”

The two men faced each other. Wildgrave brazen and defiant, yet with a slightly uncomfortable feeling in the region of his half-

benumbed conscience, Montague indignant, his eyes ablaze, the veins swollen on his forehead, yet still keeping a curb on himself for the sake of his sister, whose happiness he knew to be hanging in the balance.

"That is easily done," he said coldly. "But understand this, if you carry out your present intentions, I take my sister with me."

"You couldn't do it. I'll dare you to take her from me!"

"You'd dare me!" looking down on him as a lion might glare at a mouse.

"Yes. And I should have the law at my back, and society as well."

"The law can do many things, but it can't force a woman to live with a husband who deserts her; and as to society," in a tone of withering scorn, "who cares a brass farthing for its verdict? Go! desert your wife, live in the most shameless sin, and, because there is money in your pocket, because you are not as ugly as most men are, because you

have a handle to your name, and a long lineage behind your back, society will never shut her doors in your face, unless the scandal is too open, or," with marked emphasis, "the maker of it is somehow covered with ridicule."

"I tell you that there are too many of us in the same boat, and the ridicule would be all the other way," biting his moustaches nervously. "And as to Em," with the air of a man who knows he has done his duty and is proud of it, "I let her do what she likes from morning till night, and never grumble at a bill. What more can she want?"

"*You.*"

Wildgrave shook his head incredulously. "Not a bit of it; we got over our spoons uncommonly early. Besides, Dandy never bores her, and Spicer, Trevellyan, Merton, and Grimsby, they all keep the fun going, so she can't be dull."

"And you are content to let your wife find her comfort and amusement in a set of empty-

pated idlers, who've nothing to do but make mischief?" asked Jack, as if he could scarcely believe his ears.

"I'm infernally jealous," with a shrug of his shoulders, "but hang it all, I can trust her; and I'm not such a selfish cad as to be a thorough dog in the manger."

Jack drew a deep breath, so overpowered by the callousness of the man before him, that he was puzzled how to tackle him. His good-natured levity formed as thick an armour round him as utter heartlessness, and it seemed impossible to make any serious impression; and yet the impression *must* be made—and that quickly.

"And it was for this that you took her from her mother's care, a helpless, innocent child! You took her from a happy home to neglect her, to break her heart," watching him narrowly, he saw a slight uneasiness creep into his expression, "and then place her under the hottest fire of temptation, and ease your conscience, if you have such

a thing, by saying that you can trust her ! ”

“ And so I can,” his eyes flashing. “ I would make it hot for the man who dared to say I couldn’t.”

“ But you’ve no right to put her to such an awful test. What would be said of the officer who placed his youngest recruit in the front of the battle, and left him to fight alone ? ”

Wildgrave, not finding any answer ready, glanced expressively at the clock.

“ Yes, I know,” said Jack, without the least compunction, “ if we were playing baccarat together, you wouldn’t mind sitting up till daylight. And this business before us is of rather more importance than a game of cards. Do you know that the whole future current of two lives, not to say of three, depends on the answer you give me to-night ? ”

“ Answer ? I’m not aware that you’ve asked me anything,” with his chin in the air.

“ I ask you if you are still intent on acting

as a brute to your own wife, and a curse to another man's home?"

Wildgrave's eyes shifted uneasily from side to side, avoiding Jack's stern gaze. He muttered something, which if translated into effective action, would have sent his brother-in-law to the hottest place he knew of by reputation, and then he broke out angrily, "If you think I'm going to alter one iota of my plans because of your preachifying, you are very much mistaken."

Montague drew a deep breath, and his face wore its sternest expression. "Very well then. I've appealed to your heart, your honour, and your conscience; but none of them seem to be in working order. Stop; don't interrupt me. This *shall* be said," holding up his hand authoritatively as Wildgrave protested hotly. "Because society is shamefully lax, as you, and men like you, have helped to make it, you think you will slip away to-morrow to enjoy yourself after your own disgusting fashion, and come back, and take your place again as if

nothing had happened. But this sha'n't be so. I will make you ashamed to show your face in the club, the Park, or any place of public resort ; for as sure as I stand here, I will horse-whip you within an inch of your life, on the steps of your own club, with some of your choice friends to look on."

"You sha'n't, I swear you sha'n't. I'll appeal to the police," shaking with passion from head to foot.

"Do. They can't take me up *till I've done it*, and then, I defy you with all your cheek to hold up your head again, or to brazen it out. You will be made *ridiculous*, and ridicule does for a man sooner than anything else !"

"Leave the house this moment !" cried Wildgrave stamping his foot, almost mad with passion, "and never set your foot in it again."

"I am going," said Jack calmly. He was cool and collected now ; for he had said his say, and he fancied that he had hit the mark. Even if he had failed, there was nothing more to be done at present. It flashed through his

mind that the night-porter at the Grosvenor would let him in at any hour. He could go there, and wait until it was time to drive to Charing Cross, and see whether Wildgrave had repented or not. "I shall see my sister from time to time; but I shall keep out of your way. You may be sure of that." Then he went out of the room, stopped to put on his hat and coat in the hall, opened the large doors with difficulty, and stepped out into the teeth of a snow-storm, not a pleasant experience at three o'clock in the morning!

CHAPTER XIII.

THE NEXT MORNING.

WILDGRAVE threw himself into a chair, writhing as if he were in actual physical pain. He had been grossly insulted, without a chance of paying out his insulter. His conceit and his self-respect had been literally torn to pieces. For the first time in his life, he had seen himself in the light of Montague's scorn, as a dissolute, dishonourable scoundrel, instead of the good fellow whom women smiled on, and men patted on the back. His serene self-satisfaction was done for, but his fury was directed against the man whose frank, or, as he called them, "brutal" statements had destroyed it, and not against himself. He was a rueful object, as he sat with his head in his hands ; but he was as far

off from penitence as ever. He was no worse than other men, he told himself again and again, only other fellows weren't hampered by such a brute of a brother-in-law. After a time, when he grew calmer, and his reason was no longer over-mastered by his rage, he could not disguise from himself that he was in a most detestable fix. He could not give in—that was not to be thought of for a moment; but if he went away, he must come back some day to take up his old ways, and go to his usual haunts. Would he ever know a moment's peace, with Montague's threat hanging over his head? If he jumped out of a hansom in Pall Mall, he might be there, ready to pounce upon him, with a score of his own chums looking out of the windows and enjoying the fun! Or, horrors! he wouldn't be safe even when talking to Annalena de Rianos in the Park. Would she ever speak to him again, if such a thing happened before her eyes! That grinning ape of a husband would show his white teeth in consummate enjoyment! And

Montague would be sure to do it. He was a man of his word ; and there was a look on his face which told that he would neither forget nor forgive. Wildgrave was no coward. If duelling had not gone out of fashion, he would have faced Montague at twelve paces, calmly and coolly, and, what is more, been thankful to get the chance. But there was one thing he was more afraid of than anything else, and that was ridicule. He knew that after having been whipped like a hound, he would never have the face to show himself again at the Club. And if he went abroad, to let the affair blow over, the Society papers would send the story on before him, and it would meet him in the gaming-rooms at Monte Carlo ; he would see it in the averted faces of his friends. He glanced miserably at the decaying fire, and his small face looked already curiously drawn and white. How on earth Jack had got wind of his intentions, he could not conceive, for he certainly had not mentioned them to a soul. Somebody must have blabbed, however, and if

he could get at him, he would dearly like to pay him for it. He shivered as he looked up at the clock. Time was creeping on. Only a short interval separated him from the hour when he would have to turn out into the cold dark morning, and make his way to the station. He had not bargained for snow when he made the appointment for such an early hour ; and it would probably be several inches deep. To a man of his Sybaritic tendencies, the early start in such bitter weather seemed a huge mistake. Why he had proposed it he could not imagine, as he leant forward to try and warm his rapidly chilling hands. And, after all, was the compensation worth the trouble and confusion, he would leave behind ? He hated a fuss above everything, and he knew that there would be a fearful fuss down at Derwent's Cray, when the deserted wife flew for refuge to her mother and brother. If the affair had only been kept quiet, all would have gone smoothly, but now it would be the talk of the town. And, if he were sure of a welcome in every other house

in London, he still doubted if it would compensate him for an empty home. His thoughts went round in a circle, but always came back to the same point, that he was bound in honour, or dishonour, to go. Feeling more wretched than he had ever felt before in his easy-going life, he went slowly upstairs through the chill silence of the sleeping house. On the mat by the door of Em's boudoir, lay a long tan glove. He picked it up. It was scented delicately with his wife's favourite scent "heliotrope," and her small, fair face, with all the charm of her look and smile, seemed to rise up before him. She was a hundred thousand times prettier than that other woman, and nicer in every way. What a consummate idiot he was to take so much trouble about the other one, when this one was close at hand. He thrust the glove inside his waistcoat, and went up higher. Irresolutely he stood outside his wife's door, and then, drawn on by a sudden uncontrollable impulse, he opened it softly and went in. Em was sleeping as quietly as the happiest

of wives, with a pink glow on her cheeks, a half smile on her dear little mouth, her soft curls slightly ruffled on her white brow. His own coronet and their united monograms were on the lace-edged pillows, and a white silk eider-down, also edged with delicate lace, was thrown over the counterpane to keep out the cold. How dainty, and sweet, and innocent she looked ! How ineffably happy and peaceful ! And yet, in the morning, when Jack came to tell her the news that her husband was gone—as of course he would—how she would hate him, and how she would cry.

“Poor little girl !” he murmured, as he bent down to kiss her, and something like a tear came into his unaccustomed eye.

* * * * *

“I’ve packed all the things you will want, my lord,” said his tired servant, as soon as he reached his dressing-room ; but if he thought that the announcement would please his master, he was mistaken.

“Just tell me what the weather is doing,”

he said with a frown, as he stood before the fire which had taxed all Manser's energies to keep in a lively condition at this late hour.

Manser went to the window, opened the shutter and looked out. "Snowing as if it never meant to leave off, my lord, with icicles half a yard long, and as thick as my thumb. I doubt if any packet would start."

A sudden light flashed into the Viscount's mind. Here was a mode of escape opened to him at the last moment; and not a soul could laugh at him for taking it. He had only to write and say that the weather was "impossible," to be exonerated from all blame. Oh! what an immense relief it was to find that he could be saved from such an amount of worry and bother. No woman, even if she "walked in beauty like the night of starry climes and sunny skies," was worth a fraction of it. He dashed off a short note, expressive of the desperate disappointment he was far from feeling, gave it to his valet with strict orders that it must reach a certain address by half-

past six, and then went to bed. Physical comfort was so essential to his happiness, and he was so entirely incapable of any depth of feeling, that the throb of intense satisfaction which brought such a look of relief to his face probably arose, not from the consciousness that he was saved from a glaring sin, but that he might have as long a sleep as he chose, and not be ruthlessly torn from his bed at an hour whose existence he persistently ignored.

Softly the snow-flakes fell, like feathers from the wings of Lady Wildgrave's guardian angel. When she woke in the morning, and looked out in dismay at the depth of the snow, which had converted noisy Grosvenor Place into the most silent of thoroughfares, she little guessed from what an abyss of misery it had saved her. She could see that it covered all the sordid details, all the dirt and unloveliness of the vast city, with a white pall, and made of every soot-begrimed tree a miracle of beauty; but she knew nothing of the sin which it had draped

in the garb of innocence, of the sorrow which it had stifled in its soft caress.

* * * *

Montague, acting from a stern sense of duty, betook himself to Charing Cross at least half an hour before the tidal train was timed to start. Very few people seemed inclined to cross the Channel on such a bleak morning; and those that were going appeared to be victims of necessity and not votaries of pleasure. A thermometer down to sixteen degrees below zero is prone to have a nipping effect on romance; and Jack decided, with a sense of relief as he scanned each new arrival, that there was not a decent-looking woman amongst the whole set. He thought that it was the longest half-hour that he had ever spent, but at last the train steamed out of the station, and he knew for a fact that Wildgrave was not in it. Still, he could not be quite sure that the project had been given up, and he passed most of the day in a state of wretched uncertainty. It was late in the afternoon, and he was still

waiting, in the hopes of picking up information at the Junior Carlton. He had so much on his mind that he tried to avoid conversation by burying himself in a newspaper; but if any one came in who had the smallest acquaintance with his brother-in-law, he was on the alert in a moment, and as ready to talk as any garrulous old woman. Having gleaned nothing of any importance, and his small stock of patience being exhausted, he got up to go, half resolved to stay at the Grosvenor for a day or two to see what would happen. As he ran down the steps, however, he came upon Lord Raymond Penrose, who told him, with a significant glance, that Wildgrave had asked him to go duck-shooting in Norfolk.

“That’s all right,” said Jack heartily.

“Much obliged to you,” rejoined Dandy.

“I’d like to send you there instead of me. Some day, a seventy pound Purdy will be dug out of the snow, with six feet of frozen humanity hanging on to it. But what’s the odds, if I’m not frozen like a piece of ‘New

Zealand mutton,' I may live to be burnt like a pack of rubbish, for my people are awfully sweet on cremation. Going down home? Give my respects to the goddess."

They were just in the act of parting, when Charlie Kingston, muffled up to his ears, hurried up to them. His face was all alive with interest, as he looked from one to the other. "Have you heard the news?" he asked eagerly. "Mrs. A. of Victoria Square—confound the fellow, he nearly knocked my cigar out of my fingers."

"What of Mrs. A.? Haven't the pleasure of her acquaintance," Dandy said in his most deliberate manner, whilst Jack breathed hard, and fixed his eyes fiercely on Kingston's face.

"Found dead in her bed. Usual thing—over-dose of chloral."

"Good God!" muttered Jack, with an uncomfortable feeling that he himself was partly responsible for the tragedy.

Dandy gave him a pinch to keep him quiet, as he put on the air of a shocked, but not deeply interested, listener.

“Horrible! why was the poor creature in such a fearful hurry to go?”

“All sorts of stories afloat,” Charlie said, with a knowing look. “But I must be off, I’ve an appointment,” and springing into a hansom, he vanished, hoping that he had left them both in a state of exasperated curiosity.

“Here’s a pretty go,” murmured Dandy.

“It’s too terrible,” said Jack, “but at least Em is safe.”

“Safe?” with a frown. “I wish to heaven she were. Women like to make a dramatic exit!”

“I don’t understand you.”

Lord Raymond put his fair moustache close to Jack’s ear. “Supposing that a letter is found, and she sees an exact replica of it in the *Globe*.”

A look of dismay crossed Montague’s face. “I never thought of that. There will be the devil to pay.”

“Yes, but *she* will pay him—not he.” And then, with a little nod, he went off.

Dead—absolutely dead ! The woman whom he had spoken of with such scathing scorn in the early hours of that very day. Unfit for earth or heaven—she had fled from the one, and closed the doors of life behind her, in her rash, inconsiderate haste. What other door would open to let in her shelterless soul ? Would it wander like a homeless waif, dismissed from below, unwanted above ? Jack felt oppressed and awed, as he walked down the Mall on his way to the Grosvenor. There were very few vehicles about, and to his excited imagination the silence of death seemed to be hanging over the mighty city, and stilling its eager pulses. And yet, what was one woman's death to the millions in London ? She was not the only one who had died that day ; probably nobody cared about her over much. It was possible, and even probable, that her empty place would soon be filled up ; but this man, who had never known her, could think of nothing else. With a stern, set face, he walked down Buckingham Palace Road, which he had

almost to himself, for the severity of the weather had quenched any desire in the feminine mind for ribbons and laces. He bought up every evening paper that he could lay hands on, intending to take them to his room in the hotel, and look them over in private. As he opened the door, a figure started up from a chair by the fire, and to his own immense astonishment, he found himself standing face to face with his brother-in-law. But what a washed-out, shrunken, dishevelled edition of the dandy Viscount! His face seemed about half its usual size, his cheeks were livid, his eyes wide open and startled.

"Shake hands, Jack," said Wildgrave huskily.

Jack, who was always placable, took the small effeminate hand which he extended, and wrung it in his strong grasp. "You've had a terrible shock," he began, scarcely knowing what to say.

"Ghastly, isn't it?" with a shudder. "It was the snow that stopped me," the small

remnant of pride that was left him struggling to the surface to save him from the odious suspicion of having given way before a threat; "but anyhow, I feel as if I had killed her," his lips turning white; "but, look here, I can't talk about it. Come back to us, there's a good fellow, and take care of Em whilst I'm in Norfolk!"

CHAPTER XIV.

MISS KINGSTON IN A NEW ASPECT.

"I HAVE been trying to persuade my mother to give a ball this Christmas. Don't you think she ought to?" Miss Witherington, as she asked the question of Mr. Strangways who was paying an afternoon call at The Wilderness, had no wish to be supported by his opinion. She was only making conversation, for Mrs. Witherington had retired into her shell like a frightened, or rather offended snail, and left the manufacturer like a dead weight on her daughter's hands.

"I would advise you to try your powers on somebody else," he answered at once, as if he were glad of the opportunity. "I don't believe there's any one but a relative who could be so hard-hearted as to refuse."

"But as I can only ask a relative, that won't mend matters," she said quietly, as she poured out another cup of tea for her mother.

"I should ask the one who would be most willing to oblige me." Seeing that she made no response, he went on with his usual pertinacity, the pertinacity which had changed his poverty into wealth, and altered his place of abode from a six-roomed villa to Greytowers. "Now what would you say if I proposed to give a dance up at my place?"

"I should say that you are not the sensible man I took you for," Mrs. Witherington interposed in her plaintive voice before Di could express her surprise. "Surely there is something better than dancing to be thought of when the end of the world is so near." Mr. Strangways opened his eyes in frank amazement, for he was not intimate enough with the mistress of The Wilderness to know that she would take up an idea of this kind, and air it for a few months, after which she would put it aside and forget it, like a bonnet of which

she was tired. He remembered several dances at the house, over which she had presided with some acidity, it is true, and yet with outward civility, so that he felt completely taken aback. "Good heavens, ma'am!" he exclaimed with energy; "you don't think it's coming upon us just yet?"

"There is every sign of it," she returned composedly. "You cannot take up the paper without seeing a war in it, either in the Soudan, or Burmah, or Chili, if not nearer home. And then look at that new religion which has been started at that hall in the city—I forget its name——"

"Oh, mother! Mr. Kindersley says there's nothing new in it at all. It's only a diluted form of Arianism," put in her daughter eagerly.

"There are enough new-fangled notions to sicken a man," Strangways said in an annoyed tone. "They fish up something as old as the hills—this Buddhism, for instance, put it in a new coat, and intro-

duce it as a newly discovered stranger. I, for one, won't make my bow to it. I've known too much about it in the parts where it came from. But if it's going to bring the end of the world upon us, before I've got the proper interest on the money I've laid out, I'll swear it's a more thundering humbug than was ever started by a bogus company."

"You must talk to Miss Kingston," said Di, with an amused twinkle in her eye. "She insisted upon giving half a crown to a beggar. And the other day when I remonstrated, because I was sure he was an impostor, she actually said, 'Never mind, it will be a benefit to my soul, even if his body does not need it.' What do you think of that?"

"I should have sent the young lady off by express train to Bedlam," he replied, with gruff decision.

"It was very unselfish of her to part with half a crown," Mrs. Witherington remarked, out of her fondness for opposition ; but if her

own daughter had done it, she would certainly have scolded her well for wilful waste.

“Oh, mother dear, it was nothing of the kind!” exclaimed Di impatiently! “A Buddhist gives alms, not because the sick and needy go to his heart, but because he wishes to develope the generosity of his own nature.”

“A great mistake,” said Mr. Strangways, shaking his head, “Miss Kingston has no right to come down here, and encourage pauperism. If she wants to develope her generosity, let her go and do it in her own neighbourhood. But to return to our former subject. If you want a ball, Miss Witherington, you shall have it; but don’t you think you had better wait till my sister comes down in the summer. You could walk about the gardens in the moonlight, and be as romantic as you pleased?”

“Oh, certainly—Greytowers would be lovely on a summer’s night; but would you care to have all the trouble of a ball?”

“It would be a trouble and expense, no doubt,” he said slowly, as if counting up the

bill, "but I should not grudge either of them—under the circumstances." The blood flew into the girl's face, and her whole soul rose in revolt at the idea of accepting such a service from the arch-enemy. "Indeed, Mr. Strangways," she began earnestly; "I was only joking—I don't want a ball—I like a little homely quiet dance ever so much better, and that we can have here."

"You expressed a wish for the real article five minutes ago, and the real article you shall have," he said resolutely. "Haven't you found out by this time, Miss Witherington, that your wish is law to me?"

"Indeed I haven't!" she exclaimed hastily. "Are you not going to oppose me in the very thing that is nearest my heart?"

His heavy face flushed slightly, as he stood up. "And if my principles force me to do what you don't like in one case, is that any reason why I should not seize the first opportunity of pleasing you when I can?"

"I think it is," she said quietly. "If you

can't please me about a serious matter, what *does* it signify if you do, or if you don't, about a trifle?"

"But a thing that will cost a stiff sum of money is not my idea of a trifle."

"An affair that will be over and done with in a few hours and leave no consequences behind, is my idea of a trifle, Mr Strangways; but then I was not thinking of the cost," with a slight disdainful smile.

"No, I suppose not. It's the province of a young lady to run up bills, and get some one else to pay them."

"Not when she is put on an allowance."

He looked at her with evident admiration, as she drew herself up with grave dignity, and the snubbing she administered to him at all times and all seasons only gave him a good idea of her pluck.

"I expect you can get all you want out of the Colonel," he said with a smile. "If he doesn't give in to you and spoil you, he must be made of different stuff from other men."

"Detestable man!" Di broke out, as soon as the door closed on his colossal form. "He can't talk of anything on earth without mentioning the cost."

"I wish your father would think of it sometimes, at least," said Mrs. Witherington fretfully. "At the rate he goes on with his stables, we shall have no shelter but the work-house."

"And when we get there, I hope Mr. Kindersley, or some other old friend, will remember to bring poor daddy some 'baccy,'" with the happy laugh of girlhood, a girlhood which has never known the intensely aggravating sort of anxiety that grows out of insufficient funds.

"It's a pity the man is such a rough diamond," Mrs. Witherington said thoughtfully, for it had suddenly occurred to her that her daughter might be mistress of Greytowers if she chose.

"It's a pity that he is so rough, but I doubt his being a jewel at all. He is like a rock that has been so beaten about by the wind

that no lichen or moss will grow on it. But don't let us talk of him, I want to read 'Determination,' which is infinitely more interesting." As she spoke, she drew a low chair close to the fire, and opened the second volume of the novel with a pleasant anticipation of enjoyment. But unfortunately her daughter's inclination for reading gave Mrs. Witherington an irresistible wish for conversation, and she plagued her with continual remarks, little nothings which required no attention, and which Di answered, with her eyes fixed on the pages before them. But presently Mrs. Witherington struck on a topic of more interest, and began commenting on the friendship between the Montagues and Kingstons. "I suppose Miss Kingston has some money, and that is why Mrs. Montague is so set upon the match," she said as if the approaching engagement were a matter of general notoriety. Di's book went down upon her lap, but she did not turn round, as she said rather breathlessly, "What match, I don't understand?"

“Why, my dear child,” in a tone of expostulation, “you can’t be so blind as not to have seen it going on. Everybody is talking of it, and wondering when it is to come off. Doesn’t Mr. Montague lend her a horse, and pay her devoted attention?”

“He lends her his black mare because she wants to hunt, and he couldn’t help it, even if he would. But he likes Flo Kindersley fifty times better than Miss Kingston, and she is very often at The Priory.”

“Flo’s a mere child,” said her mother shortly. “Only the other day she had her hair down her back, whilst Miss Kingston is a woman of the world, and just the proper age for him. I shall be sorry when it comes off, as I don’t want a person with fantastic views about religion to come down here, and worry the Rector.”

“And you actually think that Mr. Montague would marry a woman with fantastic views?”

“Why not? A man who does not go to

church must have such very odd views of his own."

A look of pain crossed the girl's face. "I don't understand him at all," she said in a low voice, as her cheeks flushed hotly, "but I am sure of this, that he is one of the best men that ever lived."

"He is a most agreeable companion, but a man with no religion——"

"He *has* religion in the depths of his heart, or he couldn't be so kind and good to the poor. I don't think we have a right to—to judge him, and some day, perhaps it will all be explained," she said incoherently, as she threw down her book, and walked towards the piano. Her heart was beating fast, her cheeks were crimson, her fingers shook so much that she could scarcely play; but she was determined to stop the conversation, and she knew that music was her only resource, so she went on from Chopin to Liszt, till she settled down into the soft low strains of Mendelssohn's *Lieder*.

“ I wish somebody could explain why Mrs. Kindersley and I should be such invalids,” sighed Mrs. Witherington, as she applied a menthol-cone to her forehead, “ whilst Mrs. Montague never has such a thing as an ache or pain.”

“ Mrs. Montague thinks them such unpleasant things that she keeps them to herself when she suffers from them, and she always makes a point of being bright when visitors come in,” Di remarked over her shoulder.

“ It is all very well to talk, my dear,” in an irritated tone, “ but a headache like mine prostrates you, and I should like to know who could be bright when prostrated !”

“ Only an acrobat, I should think,” with a nervous little laugh, as she turned over her pages with an impatient hand. “ But mother dear, listen to this, it is your favourite one of all the *Lieder*.”

Mrs. Witherington subsided into silence, whilst Di played on till the strange unrest in her heart was stilled by the soothing influence

of the music. The Kindersleys, father and daughter, Jack Montague, and one or two others, were coming to dinner that evening. It was Jack's first reappearance after his stay in London, and Di had been looking forward to seeing him, in order to attack him about Nat Winter; but as she was dressing for dinner she quite forgot her protégé, for her thoughts were entirely occupied with Miss Kingston in her new aspect as Montague's future bride. It was perfectly absurd, and too utterly ridiculous, and she didn't believe it a bit—but then he had stayed with the Kingstons in Scotland, and they had stayed with him in Derwent's Cray, and he had known them ever so long ago, before he had ever heard of the existence of such people as the Witheringtons; and he constantly met them in London besides, and she moved in just the same sphere of society as he did, and she was clever and amusing, and she could talk of all the things of the day, and every one said that she dressed so well—and men liked their wives to look nice. And then

Di looked into the glass at her own reflection, critically, as she had rarely looked before, and wondered what a perfectly impartial person would think of her own personal attractions. She took it for granted that she was prejudiced in her own favour, for she could not help seeing that she looked very nice, though she only had on a last year's white cashmere, with a broad gold-coloured sash. "I must get a new frock, Redman," she said abruptly after her careful survey.

"So I've been telling you, Miss, this ever so long," remarked the maid, who considered that her young mistress never dressed up to "her station." "There's Miss Parkinson of the Grove, she never goes about even in the village, except in satins and velvets."

"Then I won't copy Miss Parkinson."

"She used to say that people respected you more if you were well dressed."

"I hope they will respect me, but not for my clothes," she said, drawing up her white neck; and then she went downstairs, with a

feeling of expectancy in her heart, as if there would be something different in this evening from any that had gone before. And the maid, looking after her with fond admiring eyes, decided that she was "the beautifullest young creature that ever stepped this earth."

CHAPTER XV.

“MY OWN POOR DICK!”

JACK MONTAGUE had felt a decided emptiness of heart all the while that he was in London ; but Aurelia Blake's words, *à propos* of that Mr. Moseley, “ You know some of his people,” had been like the constant stinging of a gnat to his mind. He was thankful to say that he did not know a single individual of the name of “ Moseley,” but of course a Moseley might have relations of a different name ; and equally of course, he might discover them either in his most casual acquaintances, or, on the other hand, amongst his closest friends. It had been like a nightmare to him ever since—a haunting dread. Even the quarrel with his brother-in-law had only put it out of his head

for a short time. After a few hours it came back, and fastened upon him like an octopus. He almost dreaded to return to Derwent's Cray and face the possibility of discovering a relation to Dick Moseley within a short distance of his own door; and yet, as soon as he was free, he could not keep away. His London friends begged him to stay where he was if he wished to be comfortable, for town was the only place where he would have a chance of keeping warm in such Arctic weather. But he told them that he was hardened to any sort of weather, and if his mother could stand it, he was sure that he might. And so he came home, bringing his burden with him. His mother gave him the warmest welcome, and showed her great content at having him back in a hundred loving ways. Jack was very thankful that all scandal concerning Wildgrave's connection with Mrs. A—— had been kept out of the papers. It would have been such a terrible shock to Mrs. Montague, as well as to his wife, because she had always

taken the most favourable view of her son-in-law. Even now, it seemed quite odd to him to hear her inquiring after him with an air of kindly interest; when, if she only guessed half that he *knew* concerning Wildgrave's goings-on, the smile would have vanished from her delicate high-bred face, and been replaced by a look of sternest severity, whilst the culprit would never have received another invitation to The Priory.

Jack went up to The Wilderness in no mood for enjoyment, and yet, at the first sight of Diana Witherington, he forgot all his anxieties as if they had never been. There was something so healthy about the tone of her mind, it was like a supply of fresh oxygen to a stifling atmosphere. One glance of her frank eyes, and morbidity fled as a ghost from the daylight—one smile from her sweet lips, and he felt like a man who has hungered, for long empty weeks, and at last found full satisfaction. Mrs. Witherington asked him pointedly after Miss Kingston, and Di, watching

surreptitiously, surprised no sign of consciousness on his face, as he made his answer in a tone of evident indifference. He went on talking about her in a matter-of-fact way, admitting that he had known her as a child, with a long plait down her back, but denying that the Ida Kingston of the present day, this *fin-de-siècle* product of a craze for originality, was at all the same person as that jolly little girl of the past, who was content simply to do as other children did before her.

"Then you won't think us all very slow and behindhand for not being quite up to date?" Di asked rather earnestly, for she had begun to fear that Derwent's Cray was lagging far behind the times, perhaps because Mr. Strangways was talking so perpetually about progress.

"I'm truly thankful for it," Jack said fervently. "It is the constant struggle to be, say, or do something that nobody ever has been, said, or done before, that does more than anything else to multiply the number of bores."

"No one need be bored after that fashion down here, need they? Mr. Kingston says we are all a century behind the rest of the world."

"Charlie Kingston's an owl. If we were, we should be in the very front rank of fashion, for we always go backwards to find anything new. But tell me how those poor creatures in Dainton are getting on in this awful weather? I shuddered to think of them when the thermometer kept going lower and lower."

Di was only too glad of an opening for describing the woes of the Winters, and long before dinner was over, Jack had promised to take Nat into his employment. But how to fit him into any hole rather puzzled him. He pictured the gamekeeper's horrified face, if he asked him to take a poacher as an underling, the coachman's or gardener's astonishment, if he begged them to find work for an ex-shoemaker. But Di wished it, so of course it must be done, for Jack Montague had arrived at that highly dangerous state, when a strong will

becomes like a spider's thread in the hands of a girl. He was so absorbed in her that he paid but little attention to the other guests, as the Rector noticed with a quiet smile. Nothing would please him more than an attachment between Di Witherington and Jack Montague, for he was certain that the girl would have, at once, a softening and ennobling influence upon the man. Jack could scarcely help being married in church, for the Rector was sure that nothing would induce the Witheringtons to consent to a merely civil marriage; and having once broken through the fetters of habit, it would be strange if his wife's loving hands could not manage to keep the links apart for the future. Probably, being an honourable man, he would tell her the secret that darkened his life, before he asked her to be his wife; and she would naturally urge upon him in return, that no secret, however dark, need keep him from his God. He knew that Jack was equally popular with the easily pleased Colonel and his more fastidious wife, so he ex-

pected no opposition ; and he rubbed his hands with pleasure as he thought of all the happiness that might accrue from such a union. Though Flo was deeply engaged with a smart young dragoon who was staying in the neighbourhood, and had come over with a friend, she found time to throw a puzzled glance now and then at Di, whom she had always believed to be the most unimpressionable girl of her acquaintance. But to-night there was a change. She was only talking to Mr. Montague, and yet, from time to time, she looked as shy as if she were overcome by some awe-inspiring stranger ; and Jack seemed different from usual, with a look on his good-looking, dear old face, such as she had never seen there before. Could it be true ? Was it really coming to pass ? The words ought to be written in capitals to express the immensity of the idea to her agitated mind. Di going to marry Jack Montague ? Oh, what a little idiot she was to think such a thing possible ! It was nonsense, utter nonsense ; and they would both go into

fits of laughter, if they guessed what a foolish fancy had come into her mind. Still, she was rather uneasy, till Captain Mayne succeeded in engrossing her thoughts with his agreeable conversation, and she forgot such disturbing possibilities in the actual pleasant chit-chat of a man of the world.

Colonel Witherington rarely stayed long in the dining-room after the ladies had left; but Jack, in his eager impatience, would not wait for the rest of the men, and betook himself to the drawing-room as soon as a decent interval had elapsed.

"Now, Jack, come over here," exclaimed Flora, with animation, "and tell us all you have seen and done in London. I am sure you've been frightfully dissipated."

"I've been dragged about from one crowded room to another—introduced to heaps of people whose names I forgot the next minute, and generally bullied and tyrannised over by my little shrimp of a sister. If that's your idea of dissipation, I'm ready to take my oath that I

won't dissipate again," he answered lightly, as his eyes roamed to the sofa where Di, with the most winning of smiles on her lips and in her eyes, was trying to wheedle her mother into consenting to give just a small dance on Christmas Eve.

Jack had been taken into her confidence, so he presently strolled over to that side of the room, to give her his promised support. He reminded Mrs. Witherington that her daughter spent so much time in disagreeable slums, that she needed a refreshing contrast in her own home. With a glance at the laughing face opposite to him, he had the audacity to say that there was a great fear that, if she was denied a proper amount of pleasure, she would become moped and depressed, and grow "anæmic"—he thought that was the word—like so many girls of his acquaintance.

"I always say those wretched slums will be the death of her," said Mrs. Witherington gloomily, but with a gleam of satisfaction crossing her brain, at what she considered to

be Montague's sympathy in her normal grievance. "I only wish her father would forbid her to put her foot in Dainton."

"I'm afraid you would be driven to giving a dance every week if he did," said Jack gravely, "for Miss Witherington would have to find some sort of outlet for her energies. At present, you see she pursues 'the golden mean,' finds time for the rich and the poor—for her social duties as well as for her socialistic."

"But I think she ought to be above such frivolity as a dance," in a tone of diminishing remonstrance.

"You wouldn't like it, if she were. Don't you consider her as the sunbeam of the house?" he asked, with a sudden flush on his face. (Di had slipped away to join Flora, and both girls were now secretly watching the colloquy from a distance.) Would you like her to be changed into the stereotyped pattern of the district-visitor—imagined by the world—a woman, with a tract in one hand, a basket in the other, a cast-iron expression on her solemn face, a

mind above or below anything but prayer-meetings and sales of work, a gown that a scullery-maid would be ashamed to be seen in, on her back ? ”

“ No ; but I should like to have her always with me.”

“ You would get so tired of each other. Excuse the apparent rudeness, but it is human nature,” he said boldly, though he felt at the moment that he would have given ten years of his life to be able to try the experiment on himself. “ You would never find anything fresh to say. Besides, we are always told that we are to share our good things with our poorer neighbours, and isn’t your daughter the best thing you have ? ” he asked, with a confident smile.

“ She’s a dear girl,” in a careless tone, as if just for the moment her mother held her rather cheap, “ but she isn’t a bit dearer than Phil, or than my other poor son,” in a low voice.

“ Your other son ? ” repeated Jack in surprise, “ I never knew you had one.”

The girls were at the piano, Flo singing "Mona," whilst Di Witherington accompanied her with perfect time and carefully subdued expression. Jack never forgot that song, though he was scarcely conscious that he listened to it at the time; but for many days, weeks, and months, the refrain rang in his ears:

"Mona, my own love,
Mona, my true love,
Art thou not mine thro' the long years to be?"

Mrs. Witherington looked nervously round to see if any one else were within hearing, but the Rector was talking to the Colonel at a safe distance, about the last addition to the latter's stable, and the rest of the guests were gathered round the piano. Montague, in spite of the fear that had haunted him for days, waited without the smallest misgiving, for Di, in her fresh young beauty, had so engrossed both heart and brain for this one evening of his life, that there was no room left for anything else.

"Where is he?" he went on with a certain amount of curiosity. "Why have I never

heard of him before?" And then his eyes strayed towards the piano, and he wished that those two fellows would move a few inches so that he might, at least, see the rich coils of her glorious hair.

"He is dead," said Mrs. Witherington, as the corners of her mouth drooped pitifully. "It is nearly four years ago now, but I'm always thinking of him because there is no one else to care."

"It must have been a great grief to you," Jack said, with ready sympathy, though he took it for granted that the dead man could not have been up to much, if, in all that kindly family, nobody cared for him but his mother. "Did he die at home?"

"Oh, dear no," wiping her eyes furtively with her lace pocket-handkerchief. "He was miles and miles away. Nobody could tell me how it happened; but it was somewhere on the Rockies."

Then it was that a hand of ice appeared to lay hold of Montague's heart, and his ghostly

dread seemed to grow into a living presence. "I was out there," he said slowly, as if the words hung heavily on his tongue, "just about that time, but I never came across a Witherington, or heard of an accident to a man of that name."

"But he never was a Witherington," she said quietly, not guessing the importance of her statement. "We were Moseleys then."

"Oh, my God!" the words were scarcely audible, but the cry came straight from an agonised heart. "Not Dick—not Dick," he stammered hoarsely, as great beads of perspiration stood out on his forehead, staring at the agitated woman with fierce eyes, as if he would tear a denial from her trembling lips.

"Yes, Dick! My own poor Dick! Oh, Mr. Montague," with pathetic eagerness, "did you ever meet him? Can you tell me anything about him?"

He sat there perfectly dumb, his right hand tightly clenched, his teeth set; all the powers of his strong will concentrated on the

effort to keep the truth back. Nothing should force it from him. She might think him deaf, drunk, mad—anything, but he *would* keep his secret. No power in earth or heaven should force him to say, “I killed your son.” Oh, the unutterable horror of the thought that the man whom he had killed was Di’s brother! His brain reeled, the blood rushed to his head, and back again to his heart, leaving his face a grey white, like that of a corpse. His sin had found him out—here, of all places in the world! It had come like a fiend with a flaming torch to turn him out of his Eden. He must go—go at once—he said to himself dully, as his breath came in long labouring gasps, and his broad chest heaved.

“Don’t be afraid to tell me,” the poor mother said, with a failing heart, as she thought she could guess the reason of his silence. “I have no illusions about him; I know he wasn’t so very, very good.”

A picture of Dick Moseley, as he was when he last saw him, rose up before Montague’s

eyes. The gambler, drunkard, swindler, bully, with his shifty, blood-shot eyes, and shaky hands, and the impress of his mean, dishonourable nature stamped on every feature of his face. "Not so very, very good!" Oh, the farce of it—the pitiful farce!

Jack bent forward. "Don't ask me about him," he said, in a curiously harsh voice, which he could scarcely have recognised as his own. "Let him rest."

Mrs. Witherington was thirsting for details after the silence of years, and she looked up in urgent remonstrance; but as her eyes fell on Jack's face—white, stern, desperate—she forgot the entreaty which was hanging on her lips, and exclaimed in startled surprise, "You are ill—you are in pain!"

He put his hand to his head for an instant, as he stood up. "I will just slip away," he said with a ghastly smile. "Don't let any one bother about me."

"But can't I do anything for you?" she asked with eagerness, for she saw an oppor-

tunity of recommending some of her favourite remedies; and, to do her justice, she was always ready to try and relieve any suffering that came under her eye.

“There is nothing to be done,” he said gravely; and there was a depth of despair in the simple words which she could not gauge. Then with only a bow, for he was too conscious of the soil on his hands to touch hers, he walked towards the door. At the door, he gave one look towards the group at the piano. How unconscious they all were of the tragedy which was being enacted only a few feet from them! There the careless happiness of unclouded hopes—here the despair of a broken life.

“There yawns a dark gulf ’twixt my darling and me.
I pass to my exile alone, unbefriended.”

In all unconsciousness, Flo sang the sad words in her mezzo-soprano, but Jack shuddered as he heard them. A gulf, broad as the Atlantic, had opened between Di Wither-

ington and himself—a gulf that neither pity nor love could ever bridge. And, as he passed out into the hall, and closed the door behind him, he felt that on the one side was all the happiness, the sunshine, the glory of life, on the other—the cold twilight of a changeless despair !

CHAPTER XVI.

HOW TO MEET THE BLOW.

OUTSIDE, in the silence of the hall, Jack was still pursued with the words of Stephen Adams's song :

"For only with death will that exile be ended,
Thou'rt lost to me, darling, for ever on earth."

Fatally true, they struck like a knife to his heart. Di was irrevocably lost to him—if the grave had closed over her head, she could not have been separated from him more completely.

"Your cart has not come round yet, sir," the footman's voice, with its trivial remark, broke in upon his misery, as he helped him on with his coat. "We didn't know that you had given the order."

"Tell Martin to follow me," Jack said

briefly, as he made an impatient sign for the door to be opened. At the moment he was conscious of no other wish than the over-mastering desire to be alone. Alone with the frosty stars and the silence of the snow-wrapped earth, he felt as if he could look his misery in the face, and brace himself to endure it. But when he got outside, and he seemed to have the whole range of the gardens, the picturesque slope of the avenue, and all the wide landscape beyond, to himself, he found it difficult even to arrange his thoughts. Wherever he turned, the way appeared to be blocked by the one unalterable fact that Dick Moseley was Diana Witherington's brother. Who could have guessed that there was the smallest link of relationship between a man who loved low company, and knew no refinement of speech or taste ; who would never hesitate to take a mean advantage of a friend, or scruple to cheat, if sure of not being found out ; a man without the smallest sense of honour, whose only knowledge of enjoyment was in a course of the low-

est vices ; a man whom it would be impossible to call a gentleman, in spite of the gentle blood which undoubtedly flowed in his veins, and either Philip or Diana Witherington ? He thought of the high-minded, thoroughbred boy, with his truthful eyes, his frank, fearless ways, his loving heart, and splendid pluck. He thought of the girl, "tender and true" as any Douglas that ever lived, but yet with a fierce scorn for all that was mean, false, or ignoble, with the air of a queen, and the thoughts of an angel ; what had either of them in common with that low minded ruffian ? Neither was there a trace of personal resemblance between Dick Moseley and the Colonel, or Mrs. Witherington ; but there was to a certain extent between him and the Richard Llewellyn Moseley, at Aurelia Blake's, for both had the same kind of thin hatchety face. Jack shivered at the thought of it. If he had never seen it, he might have been the happiest fellow on earth this cold winter's night ; but he had seen it, and, Medusa-like, it had cast a far-reaching blight before

it, which stretched from that lonesome height on the Rockies till it found him out in this little village in Blankshire. His cart came up, his horse's hoofs ringing loud and clear on the frost-bound road. He sent it on without him, for he was in no hurry to get home. Would it be worth while to hurry about anything in the empty future? He had taken deep root in Derwent's Cray, and identified himself with the best interests of the parish. The Rector looked upon him as one of his most thorough supporters, the poor people as one who was able and willing to help them. Over in Dainton he had already made his mark. Vivian counted on his assistance in this important matter of the School Board, as well as in getting up a foot-ball club, with weekly matches on Saturday afternoons. The Vicar, he knew, was very keen on the subject of foot-ball, because he thought it was only just to provide some other amusement for the men, if he asked them to keep out of the public-houses. But all this work must come to a stand-still, as far as he

was concerned, for it was absolutely necessary for him to go away. Yes, it would be like a hell upon earth to meet her constantly in the road, in his own house, or in those of his friends. He thought he should go mad if he had to do it. He must go away at once, without the smallest delay, without even seeing his mother. He leant his arms on the moss-grown stone-work of the bridge, and watched the river hurrying by. No hand of ice had been laid upon its waters, though the icicles were hanging in a fringe from the lower arch of the bridge, and the rushes on the banks were turned into sheaves of diamonds by the kiss of the moon-beams. The lap of the waters was the only sound that broke the solemn stillness. The Ploughman's Arms had long since put up its shutters, the last loiterer had gone home-wards, and the whole village slept at the foot of the darksome hills. How dark, how black, they looked against the clear sky, with here and there a pine that was taller than the rest, standing out in all its delicate tracery, clear

and distinct, with the starlit heavens for its back-ground. But Jack never cast one upward look, despair bows down, and rarely lifts so much as an eye-lash to the sky. His eyes were on the deep waters black as night wherever a willow cast its shadow, but glistening like a silver flood wherever it was touched by the light of the moon. The contrast was just as sharp between his life as it had seemed to him, that very evening, irradiated by the frank friendship which shone out of Di Witherington's grey eyes, and that life, as it was now, darkened to the blackness of the shadow of death by the knowledge that Dick Moseley was her brother. He was chilled through and through to his bones, but he was perfectly unconscious of the cold, because of the tempest of thought that was raging in his bewildered brain.

Oh, the hardness, the injustice of God! Just as his life was brightening, just as he was beginning to be of some use to his fellow-creatures, just as he saw a prospect of such

happiness as he had considered to be entirely beyond his reach, coming almost within his grasp, just as he was beginning to be reconciled with himself—then this sin rose up out of the past and struck him down. He gave a wild glance round, his face drawn and set, stooped over the waters, and watched them with fierce eyes. He would be out of it all, if he gave one jump over the low parapet. The bubbles might splash upwards towards the sky, but he would be safe down below, safe from the agony and perplexity of an intolerable position. Death tempted him with a strange, almost irresistible fascination; but the nobler part of his nature struggled against it. Suicide is the final act of cowardice, and he knew it. A man who is worthy of the name of man *must* find courage to face his fate. But how could he face it? Not there, he must go away, and at once. But why must he be an outcast? It was against no law, human or divine, to kill a man in self-defence. Why hadn't he come forward

boldly at the time, and said, "This man tried to kill me, so I did for him instead?" Because he knew that, if he had not been carried away by an outburst of rage, he *might have saved his own life without taking another's*. There was the sting, and his pride held him back; his wretched pride which bade him go and hide himself, and so robbed him for ever of his self-respect. If he had confessed his act, any man of the world would have exonerated him completely from all blame. But he held his tongue, and went and hid himself, as any murderer might who had stolen on his victim with the fiendish purpose in his heart, and done him to death by stealth. Good God! what a fool he had been. He struck the cold stone with his clenched fist, as a rage at his own folly took possession of him. It was as if he were two men in one. Jack Montague, as he figured before the world, an honest, upright, straightforward fellow, who would not tell a lie to save his life; and Jack Montague the coward, who skulked when he ought

to have stood forward ; who lived a lie amongst the friends who trusted him. Yes, his whole life was a lie, and it was this lie which had ruined him.

He stood there in the silence and solitude, utterly abased before the eye of his own inner consciousness, humiliated, crushed, as he had never been by any other man's condemnation. By nature he was absolutely truthful, and yet he saw that he must condemn himself for the untruthfulness which was the ground of his conduct. It cut him to the quick. His head was bowed in shame, though there was no one there to see.

What would Di Witherington think of him, if she only knew ! Di, the frankest, truest girl on earth. Di, who had given him her friendship so fearlessly, who came to him with such eager confidence about all the perplexities that puzzled her young mind, who had brought the first ray of light into his darkened life, who had given him a hope—yes, a glorious hope—he realised it now—now, when

it was madness. He ground his teeth in his agony, for he knew that he loved her—loved her with all the passionate strength of his nature. And yet he could never touch her soft little hand again, with her brother's blood on his own! "Oh God!" he cried aloud in the bitterness of his heart. His voice rang out with awful distinctness in the unnatural stillness, and startled him into a consciousness of what he had said. Only a few minutes ago, he had complained of God's hardness and injustice. He had spoilt his own life, and laid the blame on Providence, and yet His was the first name that sprang to his lips in his trouble. He had grumbled because his own pitiful portion of good work must be interrupted, as if God could find no one else to work for Him. How desperately important we all are in our own eyes! We are so inclined to think that if we go away, we leave a blank that no one else can fill! His lip curled in scorn at himself. If he went away that night, as he must, how could he doubt

that both Kindersley and Vivian would get some one else to help them in their difficulties, or that Di Witherington would find another friend! But to what an incredible position his own madness had brought him. He saw how wrong—how utterly selfish he had been that first time, when he turned his back on all his friends and relations, and disappeared into space. He had left his widowed mother to her loneliness, without a thought. She might have died without a word or a look from her only son. Any acquaintance near at hand would have been of more comfort and use to her than the son, who might be in South Africa, or Thibet, or at the North Pole, for all any one knew to the contrary. And Em! poor little soul! She might have been in such desperate need of a brother. She might have been driven to the wildest imprudence, if a sudden trouble had come upon her, such as the desertion of her empty-headed husband, if Dandy had been close at her side, ready to advise and console, and her natural

guardian miles, and thousands of miles away. He shivered at the mere thought of it, and yet he must risk it again. Again, when fully conscious of the burden of responsibility left on his shoulders by the death of his father. He was the head of his house, and yet he must leave it to take care of itself. Impossible! How could he go with the chance of Em wanting him; how could he go and leave Di to wonder what crime he was guilty of—self-banished, gone without a word or a sign? And yet, on the other hand, how could he stay—to see her on the Dainton Road going to her works of charity, to find her sitting at tea with his mother in the drawing-room at The Priory, to meet her in the hunting-field, to have long, delightful talks by the coverside, and the still longer, still more delightful ride home together through the gathering shadows, till the friendship grew and grew, and each drew closer to the other, as it ripened into love? He leant his head on his arms, and groaned aloud, “Fool! Fool! Fool!”

Was ever man such an idiot before? Oh, the depth of the sweetness of life just glanced at so tantalisingly! Oh, the misery and the exquisite bitterness of renunciation! And yet there was no help for it. He raised his haggard face, his resolution was taken. He would go then and there to the station, and be just in time to catch the 11.50 P.M. He always kept some of his things now in a room at his club, for, after his one serious quarrel with his brother-in-law, he thought it safer to secure another shelter for himself, instead of trusting to his precarious footing in Grosvenor Place. They would suffice him for his first start, and he could send for what he wanted afterwards. He gave a glance towards the woods in which "The Wilderness" was shrouded. The house itself was entirely hidden by the trees, so no friendly ray of light came through the branches. All looked cold, and dark, and unresponsive, in that direction, and a chill feeling of complete isolation crept over his heart. All his passionate need

of sympathy must be unanswered, all the tenderness with which his heart was brimming must be turned back upon itself. Like the dreariest, most cynical of misogynists, he must go on his way, wrapt in a cloak of reserve, never to be dropped or forgotten. And here, close by, was the river, tempting him to lie down in her bosom and rest!

He cast the temptation behind him resolutely. "Not sunk so low as that," he muttered, as he walked on with long rapid strides down the narrow lane which led to the station. His life was utterly spoilt, and mis-shaped, perhaps he couldn't do anything better with it than leave it in the mud; but he must try. The manhood within him forbade him to give up at the first check—though despair, like the devil that tempted Job, told him to curse God and die!

He walked on with his frozen hands thrust into the pockets of his overcoat, the biting wind blowing in his face, sternly unconscious of any personal discomfort. Back again came the

thought of his mother. The blow would fall hardest on her. What had she done to be treated so infamously? His heart and conscience smote him horribly as he thought of her. She had not been very well that night, so had preferred to stay at home, instead of dining at The Wilderness. Would she feel better in the morning, when they told her that her son had gone off without leaving so much as a message? He turned it over in his mind, feeling more and more uneasy as he went on. It was the meanest return to make for her exceeding love and patience. She had never uttered one word of reproach for his long absence; but the look of glad welcome on her dear old face had been like a stab to his heart; and he had almost sworn to himself that he would never desert her again. She was not so very, very strong, something might happen to her as soon as his back was turned, and then would he ever forgive himself? No, by George, he couldn't be such a brute! He would go home, tell her that he was suddenly called

away, soften the blow as much as he could, and start off by an early train the next morning before any of his neighbours were astir. Yes, it would be absolutely brutal selfishness to be absent when she first heard that she must part with him again. He turned round, and hurried back toward the high road, hoping to be in time to catch Mrs. Montague before she went to bed. This was quite within the bounds of possibility, for she often sat up for him when he was not likely to be late. All the brightness of the frosty night was dimmed, the stars had gone, no moon-beam glistened on the river, which looked dark and almost black between its snow-covered banks, and large flakes began to flutter down like white moths in the twilight round the solitary wayfarer. It was impossible to believe that only a few hours separated him from that cheerful dinner at The Wilderness; for it seemed to Jack as if he had passed through half a life-time out there in the cold unfriendly night. And so he had, if you count time, not

only by its extent, but its contents ; for he had aged by several years when he came back to the bridge, where the lane turns off from the high road. He no longer had the whole dark night to himself, for again there was the sound of wheels, and at the same time a joyous bark from a dog, which he could have sworn came from no throat but Twig-'em's. In another moment the large retriever bounded up to him, scattering the snow right and left.

“Is that you, sir? We hoped the dog would find you,” Martin's voice called out of the darkness, in a tone of relief, as he pulled up the horse, and stopped just in front of the dark figure which he imagined to be his master's. “The mistress is took bad, so they sent me to fetch you, and——”

“Bad, not really bad?” asked Jack quickly, with a choking feeling in his throat, as he jumped into the cart. The next moment, in feverish haste, he took the reins, turned the horse's head, and sent him down the road at a hand-gallop.

“ Mrs. Kent thinks very badly of her, sir.”

Good heavens ! There was the whistle of the “ 11.50 ” shrieking in his ears, and if it had not been for a tardy impulse, he would have deserted his mother, when she was very ill—if not dying. He asked no more questions, for the words stuck in his throat ; but his heart almost stood still with fear as the groom went on to say how the coachman himself had gone for the doctor, Mrs. Kent having told him that the mistress’s life might depend on his coming. Her life in danger, and her only son away ! Would he ever have forgiven himself ? Surely the impulse which sent him back must have had something to do with Providence !

END OF VOL. II.







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